

A Patchwork Love

by Diskonnekt

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Summary: A year after slaying the Red Death, Hiccup and Astrid have a close friendship, and Stoick is pressuring his son to adopt more responsibilities of the chieftainship, which includes marriage. Hiccup takes a leap of faith and asks for Astrid's hand, but one night stranded in a tiny cave together changes everything. M for thematic elements and sexual situations. Hiccstrid.

1. Chapter One

****A/N: ****_A Patchwork Love _is a twist on the friendship and relationship that develops between Hiccup and Astrid at the end of the first movie and throughout the TV show. The story I'm going to relay uses the "arranged marriage" plot, but embellishes it enough with some personal deviations. Although it is classified as Hiccstrid, the path this story will take coupled with its emotional angst will make it appear to be otherwise; I swear they come together in the end.

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<p>Chapter One

"The Heir, the Shieldmaiden, and the Dragon"

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If there existed one thing - or, rather, one person - who vexed Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third more than any other, he would immediately concede it to be she: the highly esteemed Astrid Hofferson.

Fearless Astrid Hofferson personified the term "Viking" in every way imaginable - strong, fierce, bloodthirsty, and a proud warrior from an exceedingly young age. She stood at five feet and five inches and her slender build only carried one hundred and thirty pounds of female terror.

As far as attire went, the girl possessed her own unique style: a glaucous striped sleeveless tunic, woolen dark navy leggings, a thick leather skirt with metal spikes vertically lining each strap and small animal skulls along the waistline, studded spaulders that protected her shoulders, and arm band wrappings extending from her elbows down to her wrists. Astrid did not don a helmet, but chose instead to sport her kransen, a leather headband which helped keep her hair situated, save for the fringe of hair concealing her left eye. The kransen identified her marital status as single, and because the mythic skjaldmaer rarely married and opted to lead a warrior's life, it also represented her intention of becoming a proper shieldmaiden of Berk.

Although she tended to be slimmer than most others in the tribe, one would be a fool to underestimate her strength. Astrid easily became the most agile and fleet-footed fighter of her generation, championing over all the tactless males in hand-to-hand combat. All this and her reputation of being the prettiest teenager in Berk, bolstered by her thin waist, freckled pale complexion, braided flaxen hair, cold aquamarine eyes, and her adamant stance of stubborn independence, summed up the girl into one distinctive and deadly word: valkyrie.

If one wanted to find someone in Berk who embodied the complete opposite of Astrid Hofferson, one need look no further than Hiccup Haddock. This boy portrayed a Viking as precisely as a pirate resembled any form of modest civility. He stood at a measly five feet and four inches and tipped the scale at a little over one hundred pounds, his toothpick stature anything but impressive.

Hiccup wore ordinary clothing, nothing particularly remarkable since he harbored no interest in fashion. A long-sleeved celadon dyed tunic with a wide sash wrapped around his hips, a chestnut fur vest, and avocado shaded trousers became his daily wear. He did not own a helmet or any armor whatsoever, nor did he carry any weapons, except for the small dagger he kept inside his sash.

As the son of the mighty chief of the Hairy Hooligan tribe, his vice of being physically incapable of wielding a real weapon - be it a sword, axe, mace, or bola - certainly did not help his image.

The boy's ineptitude and destructive nature labeled him the village screw-up, notorious for his inability to kill even a Terrible Terror, and usually caused more damage during dragon raids than the dragons themselves, which cost the village copious amounts of food and supplies. Messy auburn hair, ghostly emerald eyes with a cascade of freckles masking his cheeks underneath, and a tiny scar on the right side of his chin did not dissuade the moniker that the other villagers slapped onto him: Hiccup the Useless.

Hiccup's frustrations sparked their first embers in the parched woodlands of his mind fourteen full moons ago, on the night Astrid and he rode Toothless together for the first time; the night she

kissed him on the cheek, her vague explanation boiled down to "for everything else". Granted, his agitation did not breathe life at that exact point in time - oh no, as he silently gazed at Astrid's retreating figure from the cove, he experienced a complete spectrum of emotions:

Bewilderment.

Awe.

Wonder.

And the tiniest seed of hope which she planted into his cheekbone with that split-second peck of her lips, like a farmer sowing in his field before covering those kernels with the tilled rouge dirt of Hiccup's crimson blush. His stunned bemusement broke brusquely when he noticed Toothless, his onyx-scaled Night Fury of a dragon, sidling up next to him and darting a knowing glance with his chartreuse eyes at Hiccup, his human.

"W-W-What are you looking at?" Hiccup grilled his dragon exasperatedly, his tone equal parts peeved and elated. Toothless grunted a sigh and focused forward again to see Astrid vanish behind the shield in the entrance.

Hiccup really didn't know what to make of the tingling sensation which electrified his face, but from that memorable night onward, he discovered he somehow acquired a new ally - a friend. Of course, no one could replace Toothless as his first true friend, with a reputation of being the unholy offspring of lightning and death itself; however, nothing could trump the tantalizing rush of having a friend - a companion - who could actually talk back to him in plain Norse. Hiccup didn't realize, though, quite how formidable being "just friends" with his lifelong crush could be.

As always, the dawn appeared darkest before the dawn, including losing his best friend, his father, and his tribe, as Astrid so eloquently put it. But the silver lining around the storm cloud shined through - everything smoothed themselves out and gave Hiccup his almost-fairytale ending, all because of the heated ironing of Astrid's pep talk above the docks. The girl rehashed a part of his inner being the instant he lost himself in despair. In a matter of several surreal hours, the blonde Viking spontaneously matured from his jealous opponent to his only loyal supporter, even in the face of banishment by association.

Then, the battle against the Red Death came to pass, not that he could recollect much of what transpired above the volcanic island anyway. The coma Hiccup lapsed into all but erased it from his memory, save for a few glimpses of Toothless chained underwater, Astrid free-falling through the air, and a large club tail swinging up to greet him. The rank and rotten breath of the Queen still haunted his nightmares, jerking him from his restless slumber in a cold sweat, eyes wild and unseeing. On those distressful nights Hiccup appreciated that Toothless slept in his room the most, the two pairs of green eyes speaking wordless comfort to each other.

The morning Hiccup awoke from his two moon long sleep, however, only further perplexed his jumbled up emotions. The grogginess of shock persisted in clinging to the deepest recesses of his conscience as he

stumbled into the effulgent outside. It didn't take long before he recognized the electrifying touch of her lips on his face.

Only this time he _tasted _those honey-smooth lips, rather than merely felt them.

Astrid snagged Hiccup into an embrace, locking around his lower lip, which previously jutted out in a pout. He instinctively closed around her upper lip, without any clue in Hel of what to follow up with, but he didn't need to worry - it lasted three seconds at most...three glorious, unabashed, perfect seconds - something he could definitely get used to.

Unfortunately, that marked the beginning of Hiccup's downward spiral of confusion, because no more than a few hours later and the entire village rumbled with the gossip of Astrid and he. He tried to shove the rather unpleasant rumors to the back of his mind and bury them; the people who spread those should be ashamed. Hiccup could honestly only come up with two possible explanations as to why she kissed him.

The best case scenario, the one he prayed to Odin grasped straws of truth, entailed that she finally grew fond of him and maybe even liked him, however unlikely and far-fetched the thought sounded.

The worst case scenario, the one he feared of its daunting plausibility, entailed that Astrid decided to leech off of his sudden heroic reputation and the village's newfound respect for the russet-haired boy. Many others voiced their opinions of this circumstance, sometimes going as far as labeling her names like "brown-noser", "glory-soaker", and the popular "kiss-up". Hiccup became fairly disturbed by this harsh backlash against his new friend, and made sure he defended her at every opportunity, for he knew all too well the pain that accompanied having an entire village despise you.

The next day brought new light on the situation in the form of Ruffnut Thorston. The female half of the twins dragged Hiccup in between two houses on his way back home, hurriedly whispering for confirmation of what Astrid divulged to her.

"So, how about that kiss, hm?" Ruffnut leered at Hiccup, snickering at his reddening cheeks.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he huffed indignantly, unamused.

"You know _exactly_ what I'm talking about."

"All right," Hiccup grated, "If you're here to slander Astrid like everyone else-"

"Hold your dragons, string-bean. I'm just curious if what Astrid told me _in confidence_ is actually true or not," she baited, a determined glint in her eyes.

Hiccup laughed out of impatience and threw his arms up, clearly past the point of tolerance, "I haven't the faintest idea of what she said, considering I haven't spoken to her since...since _it _happened."

Not to be deterred from her personal mission, Ruffnut pressed on, "Okay, okay, so you haven't coughed up the balls to confront her about it, I get it. Really I do. That doesn't negate the fact that you have your own..." she leaned in, placing a firm hand on his shoulder, before murmuring, "...theories."

"Like I would tell you," Hiccup deadpanned, shrugging Ruff's hand off, "Besides, I have zero experience in the ladies' department! How am I supposed to understand her motives? Clue me in!" He stepped away from Ruffnut, burying his hands through his hair and continued, "It's not like she goes around kissing everybody, so it has to mean something, right?"

She didn't respond, instead choosing to drop her gaze to the ground, shuffling her feet in a very un-Ruffnut-like fashion.

"...Right?" he prodded her, fearing the worst that despite everything, the emotions remained one-sided. "What did she say?"

This encounter revealed to be one of the sparse instances where Ruff felt awkward. The twin made the assumption that Astrid's disclosure of information would be exposed for a web of lies, and that she and Hiccup forged a secret relationship behind everyone's back. That didn't seem to be the case at all, if Hiccup's reaction exhibited any indication. Ruff's intentions of making Astrid eat her own words crumbled. The other girl's declaration fell out of her mouth before she could think better of it.

"Well...she, Astrid, said that, uh, the kiss was more or less a 'show of gratitude'...for saving the village, and all..."

Hiccup blinked rapidly, feeling his knees begin to wobble and resigning himself to sinking to sit on the grass. He controlled his shaky breath and asked, "So...all it was was a simple 'thank you'? That's it?" and finishing in a much smaller voice, "Nothing more?"

Ruff hesitated, then nodded.

"And nothing less."

His russet hair fell in front of his eyes as he stared at his mismatched legs, wondering how worthwhile Astrid believed him to be, or if she did. Of course she does, Hiccup scolded himself, he only felt bitter about the realization that Astrid sincerely held no interest in him beyond amity. Ruffnut saw her cue to leave, and as he watched her swagger off, Hiccup could not help but try to rationalize things.

Astrid always took her emotions to the extreme. If she happened to be angry, confused, or exasperated, she resorted to punching and kicking as a means to get her message across. As Hiccup continued to twiddle his thumbs, he came to the conclusion that it could quite well be the same situation for gratitude and appreciation - although it resulted in a more loving reaction. He didn't feel hard-pressed to speak to Astrid about it, though; if he could put up with her punching him, he could undoubtedly handle her kissing him. That phrase still sounded foreign in his musings, and he quickly dispelled it as he trekked off

to his original destination.

Astrid certainly did not make it any easier on him or his emotional attachments as the moons passed. Hiccup became the recipient of two more intoxicating lip-locks with the blonde-haired girl; once during Snoggletog, and another after the Thawfest closing ceremony. He chose not to ask her anything about these random outbursts of affection, since his logic revealed to be sound, if slightly off-kilter.

Exuding tenderness demonstrated her gratitude to Hiccup for bringing the village's dragons back to Berk, excluding his, and for throwing the final dragon race so that Snotlout would win, because Snotlout preserving his dignity exceeded in priority over Hiccup beating Snotlout. Nothing more, nothing less.

Feeding the selfish portion of his mind, Hiccup obligated himself to question why Astrid didn't kiss him more often. Not that he wanted her lips all over his - of course not - but he did indeed rescue her numerous times on some of their adventures, and yet she never rewarded him for those. Neither did he idealize himself as entitled to romantics with his best friend, the person he bonded with the most within their age group; the problem became clear as Astrid's alternating pattern of intimacy and indifference.

The village rumors detrimentally exacerbated their societal complications. Whenever Astrid heard even remote tell-tale gossip concerning a budding young love between herself and the village hero, she scattered those thoughts immediately, falling back on her safety net that she could thank her _friend _in any way she desired.

Thus, over a full year since his defeat of the Red Death, the chief's son ascended from zero to hero, gained the moderate acceptance and respect of the general population, and established two best friends in a girl and a dragon. Everything finally seemed to be turning up Hiccup, after his life desperately needed an anchor of contentment to hold him fast.

Little did Hiccup know that an earthquake erupted out in the ocean of his future, and it would only be a matter of time before the life-altering tsunami of drama came crashing upon his scenic beaches, drenching all in its path with depression, fury, and tumultuous agony.

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The inconsistent and impulsive reactions of Astrid Hofferson muddled the thoughts of another besides Hiccup Haddock; the rigid female Viking herself also managed to become caught in a maelstrom of emotional suffering. The day that the talking fishbone trumped her in dragon training she would forever remember as the day when she experienced every conceivable feeling.

She arose that morning determined, prepared to put Hiccup in his proper place - inferior to her. Don't misunderstand her; Astrid did not hate the pathetically poor excuse for a chief's heir. She considered him a nuisance, creating unnecessary and costly accidents wherever he graced his presence, and a weak child with no hope for heroics. However, her opinions of Hiccup didn't equate to publicly bullying and harassing him - Astrid could not condone that behavior.

That is why she preferred to ignore him and treat the boy with indifference, meanwhile focusing vigorously on herself and her training. Astrid figured the rest of the village should follow her example, but alas, they did not, and she left it at that. Hiccup's estrangement did not deserve her pity.

Afterward came the grueling weeks of dragon training, and Astrid's sudden fall from stardom. Her indifference morphed into rage and jealousy as the insolent boy bested her time and time again in the Kill Ring, and the spectators swarmed the stands in droves to watch him instead of her. The former stand-out bristled with impatient fury each day the roar of the crowd cheered for Hiccup, for some reason hopelessly star-struck with his methods - even though the muttonhead never brandished a single weapon in his "victories".

Therefore, on the morning of the semi-final, when Gothi would decide the victor, Astrid stewed in a feverish haze; the bloodlust seized the blonde beauty with a viselike grip. It would be all for naught, as the auburn-haired usurper defeated the Gronckle with only his hands and secured himself the opportunity to kill the Monstrous Nightmare in front of the village. That final blow became the last straw.

The disgraced teenager resolved to get to the bottom of this fishy turn of events, and she would be ready to do anything, no matter what. Without further delay, Astrid stalked her prey into the forest, sneaking close behind to ensure she did not lose him again. They ended up in a tranquil cove - an ideal place to illicitly train in secret and avoid disruption Astrid mused.

Hiccup's private mentor being of an entirely different species, let alone the Vikings' sworn enemy, came as an unexpected jolt. In an instant, her rage boiled into flabbergasted disbelief and overwhelming disgust. On top of this heinous discovery, the traitor and his steed kidnapped her and forced her to choose between falling to her death and climbing up and riding that devil with him.

Pushing through her trepidation, she clambered up onto the dragon behind Hiccup. Her disbelief ebbed into a sense of apprehension and dread, which became substantiated as the beast began bucking and diving and spinning through the skies over the sea stacks and churning seas. Later, Astrid would admit to herself - and only herself - that that proved to be one of the most harrowing experiences of her life, and one in which she became genuinely afraid for her life. She clung to Hiccup, on the verge of tears, until desperation consumed her as she screamed out a sincere apology and pleaded to the Haddock boy, and then suddenly everything changed.

The closest she could describe flying on the back of the Night Fury with Hiccup would be sublime. For the first time in years, Astrid's heart leapt with joy as she held her arms aloft and allowed the moisture of the fluffy clouds to condense on her hands and face. They flew well past the setting of the sun, admiring the Northern Lights that shimmered and sparkled overhead in a radiant display of magenta, cyan, and lime.

Eventually, Hiccup directed Toothless to soar over Berk, and Astrid

fell in love with the view. All her life she traipsed the paths of the village, roaming in between the houses and across the fields; never in her dizziest daydreams did the blonde ever conceive she would be able to gaze on her beloved home from the _sky_. The roaring fires burning in the homes like tiny candle flames danced merrily, and Astrid forgot herself entirely. She actually snuggled closer into the gangly boy's back and rested her chin on his bony shoulder, unable to stop smiling.

Astrid now knew the meaning of awestruck.

Following an unexpected trip to the dragons' nest, the trio fluttered back into the cove, their minds racing with the night's events.

"No, no, it totally makes sense. It's like a giant beehive. They're the workers, and that's their queen. It controls them," Astrid rattled on, sliding off the dragon's back before turning to dash off, "Let's find your dad."

"No, no!" Hiccup called after her, causing her to stop as he ran up behind her, "No, not yet. They'll kill Toothless. No, Astrid, we have to think this through carefully." He started walking back over to Toothless, leaving the girl gaping.

It shocked her to say the least, but her annoyance surmounted her thunderstruck quiet.

"Hiccup, we just discovered the dragons' _nest_, the thing we've been after since Vikings first sailed here!" Astrid exclaimed, at a complete loss for the boy's ridiculousness, "And you want to keep it a secret, to protect your _pet dragon_? Are you serious?!"

At her outburst, Hiccup spun on his heel to face her, a stoic determination etched across his face, and simply replied, "Yes."

Astrid couldn't put a finger on the reason, whether it stemmed from the plainness of his answer, the steely glint in his eyes, or the all-around resolute glare he bore into her, but the manner of his response resonated deep within her. The scrawny boy finally exhibited the first quality of leadership that colored him as Chief Stoick's son - loyalty. Although, not for his father, nor for his tribe; he pledged his allegiance to not abandon nor risk the life of his first friend. With that, Hiccup unintentionally gained Astrid's wholehearted respect.

"Okay," she conceded, her demeanor falling into worry, "Then what do we do?"

Hiccup turned away slightly, having that same question buzzing in his head even before their return to the island. He appreciated her saying _we_ _and_ not _you_.

"Just give me until tomorrow," his nasally voice sounded deeper and more matured in his anxiety, "I'll figure something out."

"Okay," Astrid agreed. In that instance, as her eyes raked over Hiccup's thoughtful expression, she rather irrationally remembered that the weedy boy practically _kidnapped_ her before accidentally taking her on a, dare she say it, romantic flight. Astrid didn't want

him thinking he could do that all the time even if she admitted, in retrospect, how much she treasured the exhilaration from it; thus, she slugged him in the arm and stated, "That's for kidnapping me."

Hiccup shook his head, scowling briefly, before looking baffled back at Toothless while gesturing to Astrid as if to ask, _'What, you're not going to do anything about her hurting me now?'_ The dragon merely warbled, shook his own head as well in a _'I've done my part. You deal with her.'_ fashion, and resumed lapping from the lake.

However, Astrid ascertained that the fault for Toothless careening thousands of feet in the air did not rest solely on Hiccup's shoulders, and he did give her a new perspective of the village, of dragons, and most importantly of himself. She wanted to thank him for that, although unsure of how she should express it.

A handshake felt excessively stuffy and formal for thanking another peer.

Anything violent would be off the table, such as punching or kicking, because that would send the wrong message.

Offering a hug could be a possibility, but she went against it for she figured it would make her gesture seem intimate; she valued her sense of personal space.

As if in answer to her dilemma, a memory surfaced to the forefront of Astrid's mind:

She resided in her usual seat at the table; Astrid's legs dangled over the edge of her chair, still not yet tall enough to set her feet on the floor. Not a pertinent problem for the child, for she barely surpassed eight winters in age.

Astrid's father, Halvard Hofferson, sat directly across from his daughter, digging away at his dinner of mutton and bread. An undeniably large man, Halvard boasted rippling muscles in his arms and torso as his thick blond hair fell to his shoulders, blending in with his trimmed mustache and beard. Reaching an impressive six feet and seven inches, he towered over most of the other villagers; only Stoick the Vast stood taller. They didn't call him Halvard the Stalwart for nothing.

Astrid picked at her food, peering at her father through the bangs which shielded her forehead. Halvard, noticing his little girl's intense gaze on him, looked up from his plate, soft sapphire eyes twinkling as he winked at Astrid. She grinned, her gapped teeth shining brightly, except for the missing top incisor she lost while fighting Snotlout the day before.

The back door opened, a gust of wind blowing into the warm interior, and Ragnfrid Arnardottir bustled in, laden with foodstuffs from the marketplace. Astrid's mother, Ragnfrid - or Ragna for short - capped her figure at just over six feet, uncommonly tall for a Viking woman, and kept her long, brunette locks tied in a bun. Over the bun she wore a traditional headcovering, to fight off the bitter winter chill outdoors.

Ragna hurried over to the kitchen area, visibly shivering as she set down her burden on the counter. Rubbing her arms, she glanced over at the fire in the hearth, which dulled to faintly dying embers, most of the wood consumed for some time in her absence.

"Hal, could you be a dear and fetch some more wood for the fire?" Ragna inquired sweetly, already in the process of putting away her purchases in their respective cabinets.

He tossed his bread onto his plate, heaved himself up and stretched his burly arms before rumbling, "Sure thing." Halvard then lumbered out the front door, returning moments later with an armful of firewood. Dropping the fuel into the hearth as if it weighed nothing, he stoked the flames until the room swam in a soft glow of flickering amber again. Hal reclaimed his chair at the table and resumed satiating his hunger.

Little eight year old Astrid watched with curiosity as her mother smiled softly and waltzed over to her father's side. Ragna hardly needed to bend over when she placed a quick kiss on her husband's cheek and murmured, "Thank you."

Hal swiveled his head around to stare fondly into his wife's sepia eyes, slowly nodding in understanding.

The present slammed into Astrid's reverie as she abruptly snapped out of her thoughts. Brushing her bangs out of her face, she flicked her gaze up at Hiccup before downcasting it again. She made up her mind.

In a beat of a dragon's wing, Astrid reached out and grabbed a handful of the boy's tunic and tugged him forward. She barely registered his initial reaction, which consisted of squeezing his eyes tightly shut and hunching his shoulders up defensively, preparing for another violent encounter with her fist. When Astrid's lips pressed firmly against his cheek, however, Hiccup wrenched his eyes open, nonplussed; he didn't expect _that_. As she pulled away from him, Astrid could not bring herself to make eye contact with him - not out of embarrassment, but out of illogical timidity. How could this _hiccup_ make her feel shy? Preposterous.

"And that's for...everything else," Astrid finished meekly, turning her back on Hiccup and stepping away determinedly. She stopped after a few paces and cocked her head to look behind her. He still seemed rather lost about what occurred right then, but Astrid noted an upward curve grace his lips on his boyish face. Seeing that tiny expression of joy caused something deep inside the girl's heart to twang, a taut string subtly plucked and left to vibrate. She couldn't name the emotion, but the only way Astrid deemed to depict it with words resembled her stomach having _fluttered_. That proposal sounded ridiculous though; birds fluttered, not internal organs. She buried her thoughts of winged body parts and scampered off.

Astrid would not feel that fluttering inside of her again until two moons later, on the morning that the chief's son finally decided to quit being in a comatose state. The silly boy scared the yak dung out of her, making her fret for weeks over whether he might wake up or not, and yet there he stood at the top of the steps outside his front door. Even worse for the girl's conscience, it appeared as though Hiccup's voice rang with amusement while cracking jokes about his

prosthetic and the fact that _he lost half his damned leg_.

The flaxen-crowned girl sprinted up the hill to the boy's side, and wasted no time in throwing a solid punch into his arm. He deserved it after all.

"That's for scaring me!" Astrid declared over Hiccup's interjection of pain. He wished he could be spared any more wrath, finding no pleasure in his usefulness as a punching bag for Astrid's ire, especially after nearly dying.

"W-What, is it always going to be this way?!" Hiccup bit heatedly, ready to launch into an exaggerated tirade of grievances.
"Because-"

In a conscious decision validated by two reasons, Astrid stepped forward and latched onto the front of the boy's celadon tunic once more. She leaned in and silenced Hiccup's complaining by crashing her lips onto his, tuning out the catcalls of the surrounding crowd.

Since Hiccup did save the village and destroyed a dragon as massive as a mountain, Astrid felt justified that his heroics garnered her gratitude, ergo the kiss. A much smaller part of her also desperately wanted the humble boy to shut up.

As Astrid broke away, Hiccup's eyes remained half-lidded in his state of dreamy foggiess. He stared straight ahead as he concluded his statement, "...I could get used to it."

Astrid grinned at his response, to which he smiled back warmly, and the girl discerned her heart clench a second time - that blasted fluttery feeling. She couldn't make heads or tails of the raging tempest inside her bosom, except that it made her uncomfortable. Like she felt gassy or something. Astrid didn't want to think about it. Hiccup may be the village hero now, but he did not have permission to spawn tiny dragons inside her small and knotted gut; it all seemed unnatural.

Okay, she officially lost her marbles, but that soon became the least pertinent of her problems.

Being a village of only five hundred resident Vikings, news on Berk spread like dragon fire. It took mere hours for the gossip of Astrid kissing Hiccup to evolve into common knowledge, with theories of why being tossed around like a bashyball. Astrid's most urgent predicament hailed in the form of another blonde-haired teenager, but her hair divided into three braids rather than one: Ruffnut Thorston.

"OI! HOFFERSON!" Ruff bellowed as she rapidly closed in on her target, who happened to be tending to her azure and gold Deadly Nadder, Stormfly, behind her house.

"What is it, Ruff?" came Astrid's response, poking her head around the stocky leg of the dragon. Ruff caught her by surprise when the female twin bull-rushed her and tried to pin her to the ground. Stormfly squawked in alarm as the two girls wrestled beneath her, fighting for dominance, until Astrid managed to slam her opponent into the rocky dirt, face first.

"What in Thor's name was that for?!" Astrid shrieked, twisting Ruff's arms behind her back to minimize any chance of her escaping. Ruff gave her best effort to glare at her captor, spitting a few loose strands of hair out of her mouth.

"You didn't think I would find out? You kissed my fishbone!" she growled menacingly, disregarding the obvious problem of already being overpowered, "I had dibs on Hiccup!"

"That's it?" Astrid guffawed. She expected something more disastrous, which in Ruffnut's case would mean less disaster.

"What do you mean, 'THAT'S IT'?!" Ruff spat out, "If you're trying to claim him too, then I don't stand a chance!"

A light clicked on in Astrid's head as she scrutinized the crazed girl beneath her, "Wait, wait, wait. You think I like Hiccup?"

"Well, do you?"

"Don't be absurd, of course not! He's a friend, and that's all," Astrid gainsaid, vehemently shaking her head and causing her braid to whip from side to side, similar to a pendulum.

At the other girl's rebuttal, the twin visibly relaxed, her previously tense muscles straining against the superior strength above falling limp. Astrid maintained her seat on Ruff's hamstrings despite acknowledging that her attacker made no move to recommence fighting.

"You mean it?" Ruff asked, a hint of relief breaking through the forced façade of indifference. Receiving a vigorous nod for an answer, she continued, "In that case, you mind releasing me? I can't feel my feet since your tree trunk legs cut off the blood circulation."

Astrid swatted the trapped girl's rump, feigning offense, before scrambling off and readjusting her skewed skirt. Ruffnut flipped over, but at Astrid's offered hand of assistance, she promptly ignored it.

"Anyway, that should teach you from trying to accost me again," Astrid reprimanded audaciously, hands on her hips, earning a snort from the still-seated twin.

"Yeah, yeah, we've all heard you're the Viqueen of the wrestling floor," Ruff drawled, scarcely containing her eye-roll at the girl's past insistence of the terminology, "So...if you don't like string-bean, then why did you kiss him?"

The tail end of her question inflected into a pout, which Astrid chose to actively dismiss as she resumed polishing Stormfly's scales, "It was just a show of gratitude...you know, for risking his life to rescue the other villagers." Her tongue poked out of her mouth with the laborious monotony of rubbing the dragon's side. Not entirely satisfied with that answer, Ruffnut hugged her knees to her chest and furrowed her brows.

"But all six of us risked our skins to save them. I don't see you puckering up to Snotlout for it." She revelled in Astrid's grimace of revulsion.

"He didn't lose half his leg if you remember."

"So it was a pity kiss?" Ruff questioned in surprise, "Man, that's low, especially for you."

Astrid glowered at the girl's persistent interrogation, "No, you yak-brain! What I'm saying is that Hiccup was the only one who sacrificed something in the rescue - he's a hero now, and he should be treated as such."

"You couldn't have said a simple thank you?" Ruff pushed belligerently, much to Astrid's annoyance. Stormfly crowed in agitation as her rider halted her grooming a second time by whirling on the twin.

"Look, I'm expressively impulsive, all right?!" she scowled while crossing her arms, "If you need reassurance, it won't happen again." She didn't know if she could hold herself to that, because although the sensation of kissing Hiccup still felt alien to Astrid, it proved to be enjoyable at least.

Ruff opened her mouth to argue, not at all comforted by Astrid's promise, but at the sight of her eyelids narrowing dangerously over those icy pupils, the twin thought better of it. Instead, she picked herself up out of the dirt and brushed off the loose debris, then jerked her head in quick assent and plodded away. Astrid huffed as she watched the other girl depart, noting the subtle skip in her step as her silhouette vanished around a corner.

A sharp prod in the small of her back recalled Astrid's attention to her interrupted activity, the impatience of the Nadder unmistakeable via the flustered chirping.

"Sorry girl, I'll finish you up now. How about a fast lap around the island afterward?" Astrid cooed, wanting to appease her vain dragon. Stormfly chortled in agreement, lifting her wing so her blonde girl could finish polishing her dull flank.

It didn't take long for the blonde to break her promise to Ruffnut - twice. Both incidences saw the female twin hunting down Astrid, and then proceeding to badger her with accusations like "disloyalty" and "encroaching on her territory". Since when did Hiccup become some land to be conquered? Nevertheless, the resilient teenager referred to her original excuse for smooching the chief's son; nothing more than a demonstration of Astrid's appreciation.

A thought struck Astrid as Ruff incessantly harped at her - between Ruff's protective nature over Hiccup and her adamant affections for him, why didn't she make her move yet? Inquiring this of the Thorston returned a wrinkled nose and a twisted scowl, accompanied with her blunt retort, "I have."

Oh. _Oh_.

No wonder the girl's wistfulness soured into something similar to pining exasperation. According to her, whenever she attempted to get

the clueless boy alone with her, he would stutter out some half-baked excuse before fleeing the area - and the ground - atop of Toothless. His latest reasoning for abandoning Ruffnut consisted of needing to eat supper; this occurred shortly after breakfast.

Astrid felt a twinge of guilt for her friend, but she would never admit it. If Hiccup did not want Ruff's attention, she supposed it remained his prerogative to refuse it. Why he would though persisted to be an intriguing mystery.

Maybe he kept his affections reserved for someone else in Berk.

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As the only Night Fury in the archipelago, Toothless established himself as extraordinarily unique many winters ago. His sleek ebony scales camouflaged the dragon against the midnight sky, with only the winking of the stars to betray his position. His sharp ivory teeth retracted to grant his fire blasts unimpeded passage in hitting their marks with pinpoint accuracy and precision. Eight aerodynamic ear plates encompassed his triangular head like the mane of a lion, spanning from the base of his jawline up, behind his zygomatic arches and meeting at the pinnacle of his skull. When deployed, these flaps disrupted the surrounding airflow and generated his characteristic whistling screech.

And, as fate would have it, the dragon lost his left tail fin upon being miraculously shot out of the air by a Viking runt. Despite his grounded state grievously injuring his vanity, Toothless learned to cope, and fortunately his patience paid off - his imminent killer not only set him free, but also helped him fly again.

The Night Fury swelled with gratification when he evaluated his two most distinguished attributes: his qualities of keen observation and attentive audition. After the day when Toothless placed his snout in Hiccup's outstretched palm and formed their forbidden friendship, the boy began to open up to him more, including discussing topics which involved his savage village. His new friend also spoke in an enraptured manner about a certain "Astrid".

Toothless prided himself in being one of the most intelligent species of dragon; he immediately recognized his rider's infatuation with this Viking girl. Hiccup's body exhibited many physical reactions that the dragon previously observed from the interactions of other animals: dilated pupils, accelerated heart rate, and his olfactory sensed a distinct change in the boy's scent. However, from Hiccup's dejected pining, Toothless understood the haughty girl did not give Hiccup the time of day - nor the time of night, nor any time whatsoever for that matter. She ignored his boy, and that fact alone qualified her as being as despicable as the rest of the tribe.

It came as no surprise that the dragon seethed with anger upon seeing this "Astrid" in his cove with his rider, and charged her with protracted teeth when she assaulted Hiccup with her feet and her glorified stick. Shortly proceeding introductions, the blonde devil ran out of the bowl, presumably to her village, and Toothless snorted his approval when the aggravation left. He couldn't be bothered to care, even if his boy did. Of course, Hiccup formulated his own ideas as he climbed into the saddle and urged the dragon to follow her.

The pair ended up snagging the escapee and tossing her into the limbs of the tallest tree. Toothless eagerly wanted to leave the brat there, stranded in the foliage canopy, and became disgruntled with Hiccup's intentions to convince her to climb onto his back and have him fly her down to solid ground. The mischievous Night Fury decided he refused to allow this "Astrid" off the proverbial hook so easily; she hurt his tiny friend and would suffer his strategic admonishment.

Before his rider could take evasive maneuvers, Toothless shot vertically skyward and delighted in the shrill screaming coming from the girl. It didn't matter how much Hiccup altered his tail fin throughout the dizzying journey - the dragon flew with no destination, and only one objective.

This Viking girl would apologize to his boy if her life depended on it, because at the moment the possibility inched closer to reality.

A few chaotic minutes passed until Toothless heard the magic word ring out behind him: "sorry". He knew that Norse word equated to an apology, for he listened to Hiccup use it repeatedly during his morose soliloquies. The crack in "Astrid's" voice confirmed to the dragon of her sincerity, and so he, somewhat reluctantly, snapped his wings wide and halted the erratic flight.

Toothless' unyielding stubbornness persuaded him to not fully comply with his boy's wishes, as he took it upon himself to aid Hiccup in his mating endeavors with the female passenger by gently gliding higher into the clouds.

Eventually, the dragon's ears picked up the almost inaudible gasps of awe and admiration from the girl. Now that she finally quit being such a dolt, he could relish in the knowledge of "Astrid" enjoying the sensations cascading all around her.

As Berk's fires danced beneath them, the Night Fury detected one of the hearts pounding above him skip a beat. Burning with curiosity, Toothless swiveled his head to the right, and upon seeing their faces alight with bliss, flashed a toothy grin at the Vikings. The girl wrapped herself tighter around Hiccup and nestled her chin into his shoulder, causing the other heart to skip. Her entranced expression could be summed up with one word: content - and for that, Toothless smugly congratulated himself.

Later that night, the band of adventurers returned to the welcoming basin which the ebony dragon called home. The two teenagers trotted off a short way, deep in discussion, providing Toothless the chance to quench his thirst from the lake. From his peripheral, he spied the girl punch his boy in the arm; the dragon didn't react, no longer deeming "Astrid" as a threat on account of her sharing in the wonder of their secret.

Nonetheless, that didn't seem to resonate with his rider, as he afforded his friend a dumbfounded glower. Toothless simply responded with a bemused snigger.

Right as he dipped his muzzle into the water, a fast blur of motion reverted his attention back to the Vikings. The girl...O Smaug's

scales, she attached her mouth onto his boy's cheek! She appeared to be blantly eating his face off!

Toothless would not let this "Astrid" gnaw on his tiny friend, and almost intervened to separate them, but she released the boy before he could. That's when he realized Hiccup never made any attempt to escape her clutches, and neither did he call for help. In fact, he could hear the faint sound of Hiccup's heart speed up, and the familiar aroma of attracted stimulation waft to his flared nostrils.

Toothless surmised one conclusion from what he witnessed - Vikings practiced cannibalism as a mating ritual.

The animal kingdom revealed itself to be familiar with this concept in the past. The vigilant dragon played spectator to a pair of black spiders mating, and post-coitus the larger female ensnared, killed, and consumed her male counterpart. Toothless hoped that that wouldn't be Hiccup's fate as well if the girl decided to copulate with his rider; he needed the boy to be able to fly.

The dragon became unsure about the accuracy of his summation, however, when he didn't smell any pheromones being emitted from the blonde. Hiccup's fragrance practically engulfed him, and Toothless determined it failed to affect her - until she jogged away. His ear flaps perked forward when he heard the brief quickening of the retreating girl's heartbeat. He wished that meant his boy made a positive impression on her; Toothless would not be giving free rides to every potential mate his boy became smitten by.

He would have to excise a toll if it came to that. A ten percent fish tax at supper, no exceptions.

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><p>AN: **Thank you for reading, and I would greatly appreciate it if you left a review! I created a progress report for this story on my profile that I update regularly, out of courtesy for my readers. Next chapter will get the ball rolling on the plot, initiated by some Hiccup/Stoick tension, so make yourself at home because this story is far from over! Diskonnekt out.

2. Chapter Two

A/N: First and foremost, I am flabbergasted at the response the maiden chapter conjured - I'm truly honored! As such, I would like to share my deepest gratitude to everyone who followed, favorited, or reviewed! It's a great motivator and drives me to keep writing so that you receive my best narrative efforts. I apologize for the copious amount of details and the meager remnants of dialogue in the first chapter, but I needed to elaborate on the characters' reflections before I delved into the first act's plot line. Accordingly, here is the introduction for that, with a moderate helping of Hiccup and Toothless shenanigans.

Disclaimer: I hereby acknowledge that the rights to everything for the How to Train Your Dragon universe continue to elude my grasp

- ergo, all credit is given to whom it is due.

* * *

><p>Chapter Two_

"Exorbitant Expectations"

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Winter. In more rational parts of the world, it endured no longer than twelve weeks and never escalated further than "moderately aggravating". These areas also benefitted in having all four of the seasons to cyclicly look forward to with zeal throughout the year: winters thawed into soggy springs; which scorched into sweltering summers; which decayed into crispy autumns; until the predictable circuit came full circle and froze back into blizzardous winters. Regrettably, this process of revolving weather patterns did not pervade into the intemperate climate of Berk and the hardy Vikings who dwelled there.

The island of Berk struggled for nine moons of the year trudging through various degrees of winter, from a light chill nipping one's nose to cataclysmic avalanches of snow that could give one frostbite on the spleen. The single saving grace from the bone-chilling storms of hazardous precipitation and panoramas of dormant forests snuck by as a vile imposter of summer, a brief three moon respite which momentarily invigorated the isle's voluminous wilderness into bloom.

For Hiccup, he despised winter and the frigidity that accompanied it, the vindications for his abhorrence of the snow saturated season starting in his youth and gradually expanding into the present. He hated the feeling of subzero desolation seeping through his pores and into his chattering bones, the very warmth within his body being stolen away. He hated the deterioration of life that stripped nature of its comforting serenity, leaving behind exposure of nakedness and vulnerability to the elements in its wake. He hated the isolaton that stemmed from the ice setting in the ocean and the powdery snowdrifts mounding like desert sand dunes, severing communication with Vikings beyond the horizon and right next door. Most significantly, Hiccup hated how the glacial numbness seared the nerves of his amputated left leg, a scalding cattle prod of ice burning beneath his flesh without any visible trace.

Unfortunately for the auburn-haired teenager, that time of year lurked on the outskirts of cognizance, winter's spindly pallid fingers caressing the Barbaric Archipelago in its entirety with stiff breezes and sporadic flurries. Devastating winter reared its hideous head and bared its vicious fangs on Berk's doorstep, the prospect of pouncing on the unsuspecting Hooligans at the first opportunity more than appetizing. Hiccup withstood the icy harshness of his home's climate for one lone gratification - dragonback flying across the aerial canvas, excavating the pillaring clouds with feats and maneuvers he once believed only the birds could accomplish.

Hiccup's mirth inundated when he soared in the skies over Berk astride his faithful Night Fury; there proved to be nothing else which elevated the boy's spirits quite like the brisk wind whipping his face and disheveling his mop of hair. His elated glow beamed

particularly luminous one fateful morning as the flying ace duo rocketed in and out of the castles of cumulus clouds, the sea stacks jutting from the restless waters far below them, mere miniatures of their true glory. Hiccup emitted a resounding whoop following a perfectly executed tuck-and-roll, an aerobatic masterpiece that, one among many, came as second nature to the pair.

In a full year since the conciliation of Vikings and dragons, the chief's son eventually began to exude traits of delayed physical maturity. Well into his sixteenth year of age, Hiccup found himself in the middle of a growth spurt, sprouting shy of half a foot in height and packing a whopping thirty pounds onto his rangy frame. Of course, the majority of his newfound weight could be ascribed to the toned and thinly corded muscles in his arms and core which twisted and knotted into genesis from the extensive amount of time he spent flying with Toothless. The wind shear abused his pale face and painted a vermilion flush amidst his freckles as the shadow of stubble on his jawline tingled relentlessly from the chilly blasts. Hiccup scratched the underside of his dragon's ear plates, directing him to glide towards the gnarled silhouette of the lonely mountain which overlooked the village, a tapering skyscraper against the heavens.

"All right, bud!" Hiccup's shout penetrated through the roaring gale of the wind, "You think we can finally nail that double corkscrew?"

Toothless screeched a cry of assent, throwing his head forward with resolve for the undertaking as they neared the foot of the towering spire, the Mead Hall carved out majestically into its side. Upon reaching the bottom beautified with sparse rock formations and broken tree lines, Hiccup clicked their prosthetics into position three, collapsing the fake tail fin halfway and banking left around the mountain. Rising higher into the sky, the duo's turning sharpened as they rounded the barren contour guide of the land mass, close enough that Hiccup could stretch out his arm and drag his finger pads through the dirt if he desired.

The dirt petered off into a snowcapped peak before elongating into a pinnacle which the boy and his dragon circumnavigated with continuously shrinking circles, steadily accumulating speed during the ascent. Having mustered enough momentum for the finicky maneuver, they reached the apex of the peak, and Toothless cut away vertically into the air, maintaining the stomach-churning tight spin in likeness of a rotating top.

"Yeah! Come on, bud!" Hiccup cheered encouragingly to the dragon splitting the overhead sky, a fire-breathing onyx projectile slicing the stark morning brilliance, "Ready for the drop!"

At his command, Toothless fanned his wings out a fraction, allowing the gusts of wind to billow around him and stall their ascension towards the clouds. Reacting simultaneously, Hiccup switched their connected stirrup into position four, reclosing the tail fin and decelerating the corkscrew spiral until they lost all essential power and hung suspended in midair for an extended, gravity-absent second. The Night Fury let loose an exhilarated warble at the highest altitude of their climb and blasted a violet plasma bolt into Valhalla, marking the halfway point of the trick.

"Yahoo!" Hiccup chanted gleefully, feeling the pull of gravity begin to take effect and pull the pair of daredevil flyers back to Midgard.

Toothless flipped backwards, pelting downward with the snowy cap of the spire in his sights, taking care to sustain a perpendicular angle to the horizon. He deployed four of the eight flaps which encompassed his spearpoint head, immediately piercing the void silence with his infamous whistle. Hiccup crouched lower in the saddle by raising his backside and squinting his eyelids against the rushing air currents, rerouting his concentration from the first corkscrew to the second. They plummeted at breakneck speeds, the mountain below enlarging exponentially as they made their daring approach to the windswept peak.

Two hundred feet.

"Okay, bud, on my mark!" the boy reminded his friend, who expelled a smoky plume in reassurance to his rider, as he tensed every sinew and tendon in his wiry body, "Hold, Toothless, hold..."

One hundred feet.

The anticipation became suffocating while the duo dropped, the will to master this latest aerobatic spectacle unparalleled. The endorphins coursing through Hiccup sent his brain reeling with ecstasy into a high not even ingested dragon nip could produce - if the experiments conducted with the aromatic grass by a hilariously hallucinating Astrid could be trusted.

Fifty feet.

"NOW!" Hiccup bellowed, his indicative order uncannily powerful in his endeavor of being heard by Toothless.

In practiced unison, the boy swiftly shoved his metal ankle into position two as the dragon contorted his arched bat wings, the combined effort tilting the pair in reverse the smallest of margins. The nuance of change revealed to be enough, because rather than crashing headlong into the mountain's snow shelf, the team whisked by the pointed column, descending along its jagged vertical contour. Hiccup hurraed at their success, leaning over slightly and watching the skewed landscape of the spire's mediocre shrubbery whip past, a goofy grin cracking his chapped lips; it would be smooth flying here until they made their final approach to the village several hundred feet ahead of them.

"Time for the grand finale!" Hiccup hollered, "Let's finish this off in style, bud!" Toothless crooned his energetic compliance and slit his eyelids in indivisible focus on the denouement of their stunt.

The boy's tightening chest nurtured a bubble of excitement which began to expand, augmenting until it strained against the inside of his ribcage, threatening to burst from the tension. The stimulating adrenaline pumped through his veins in compensation, gushing scarlet rivers that hiked his motivation to unfathomable heights.

Three hundred feet.

Hiccup roared a personal battle cry which echoed off the mountainside, hurdling straight for certain death if the pair didn't pull out of the dive at precisely the right moment. The tiny dots of the village houses grew into discernible structures the farther they dive-bombed, unfazed by the speed which singlehandedly smashed all their previous records, unmatched by any of the other dragons.

Two hundred feet.

Toothless shivered from the unabashed felicity he exhibited as he braced his scaly figure for the impending conclusion to this maneuver. His rider dug his intact heel further into the Night Fury's right flank, the nonverbal signal to prepare for an exceedingly agile flight pattern. Hiccup clutched the saddle tighter, a storm of joy and anxiety coursing within him, raging a war for some form of equilibrium.

One hundred feet.

"Now, bud!" the boy yelled, "Corkscrew and snap roll!"

The giant double doors to the Mead Hall stood erect and august on their port side when Hiccup and Toothless initiated the second corkscrew. Being this close to the ground meant the spiral couldn't be prolonged, but allowed for any unapplied energy to accelerate the momentum of the tailspin. Hiccup plunged the stirrup into position one, full expansion, as Toothless spread his wings and ear flaps to their greatest extent, catching as much air resistance as possible before they barreled right through the roof of the grandest house in Berk, which happened to be the Haddock residence itself.

Thirty feet.

"Come on!" Hiccup implored aggressively, shrinking back in the saddle to help counterbalance the center of gravity and break free from the suicidal nosedive.

Suddenly and without warning, the duo reared backwards at the most optimum angle, zooming out of the perilous death drop and zipping less than ten feet over the chief's family lodging. Hiccup shouted in triumph after avoiding the protruding obstacle and soared dangerously close above the central plaza, where a single figure strode confidently through its heart in the direction of the entrance ramp to the docks.

"That's how it's done! That's how we do it, Toothless!" the boy cried out in unadulterated delight, causing the hulking man in the plaza to redirect his attention up to find the source of the early morning racket.

Hiccup did not need to scrutinize the identity of the man for he instantly recognized him from his size and carriage. Passing overhead, he glanced down to see his father, Chief Stoick, beard swaying as he wagged his head in agitated disapproval of his son's foolishness.

"HICCUP!" Stoick admonished in his thundering bass voice, feigning an aura of authority, considering his son practically lived in the vast expanse of the sky while he could do nothing about it on the limiting ground. This became one of those times when the chief sorely missed

his indigo Thunderdrum, Thornado, and everything the two stout warriors used to accomplish together.

The chief's heir twisted in his seat to view his father vanish among the cluttered rooftops, offering a weak wave of acknowledgment to him as he disappeared. Hiccup knew he would be getting an earful later from him when he landed, and that became all the more reason to avoid touching down early. Toothless gurgled with ignorant happiness, beating his wings properly now to regain the altitude they sacrificed in pursuit of their performance; the boy and the dragon proved to be a force to be reckoned with, an unbeatable team of expert flyers.

It would be a dream come true for Hiccup if he discovered a way to permanently stay airborne, away from all the troubles and worries that Berk harbored beneath them. The swelling euphoria, the insatiable wanderlust, and the weightlessness of flying all only strengthened his resolve to cling to the last dilapidated threads of his dissipating freedom.

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The sun hung at high noon by the time Hiccup yielded to the scolding voice nagging in the confines of his mind. He coaxed Toothless into a meandering landing cycle, eclipsing the Haddock house in progressively constricting doughnuts, before the pair skittered to a halt on the grassy knoll.

The boy made no move to dismount the dragon, procrastinating on the inevitable as he eyed the front door warily. He shouldn't be this nervous; the afternoon still sang with youth, and his father typically didn't return home from his chiefing duties until the coolness of dusk sank in.

That recurring voice whispered its infinitesimal worries about today - the rash paranoia stemming from the eeriness. It caused the little hairs on the back of his neck to stand on end as a phantom chill rippled down his spine. He rubbed the miniscule bumps prickling along his forearms, praying he could dispell the strange vibes of uneasiness gripping his subconscious. Toothless peered behind him at his stationary rider, patiently questioning his indecision and concerned with his lack of movement.

"Sorry, bud," Hiccup breathed, inclining forward and scratching the underside of the dragon's jaw, "I guess I'm just a little apprehensive."

Toothless crooned apologetically at his boy's detachment, seeking to cheer him up in any way within his draconic power. Hiccup offered the dragon an appreciative smile before slipping out of the saddle, hastily unbuckling the tack and tail and lugging the load to the entrance of his house. He nearly spun around and leapt back onto Toothless, a frantic supplication to escape what might or might not be on the other side of the door.

Squaring his shoulders, Hiccup readjusted his grip on the Night Fury's riding gear and pushed the door open, the metal hinges squealing and as he cringed from interrupting the relative peace, tentatively poking his head through the crack. He swiftly scanned the front room with prying, alert eyes, temporarily immobile at the entrance.

Nothing. The emptiness of the house deafened his eardrums in its silent guard.

Hiccup exhaled the breath he didn't realize he held in, relief washing over him like warm water on laugardagur. He crept across the threshold with the dragon tack in tow, heading for the far corner of the room where he stored most of Toothless' necessities. The dragon himself ambled after the preoccupied boy, hoping to weasel a midday snack out of him.

Fishing out a small basket of fresh cod from one of the kitchen cupboards, Hiccup set it down in front of the hungry dragon and massaged his smooth neck while the reptile tore through the food.

"Somebody would assume I starved you from the way you're scarfing that down your gullet," Hiccup laughed, amused by his dragon's famished dramatics. Toothless huffed into the woven container as his singular recognition of hearing his rider mock him, much too distracted by the delectable morsels of cod. The waves of anxiety that lapped on Hiccup's conscience retreated to the ocean of blissful ignorance in his meditative observation of his best friend.

Who is he kidding? Toothless surpassed the status of best friend several moons ago; the two strengthened their camaraderie into inextricable soulmates, two puzzle pieces who fit each other without err.

The dragon slurped up the final fish and cocked his snout towards Hiccup, but when the boy leaned down to retrieve the temporary tray, Toothless spared him a gummy grin before lathering the unsuspecting boy's face with a viscid lick and bounding away.

"Ugh-! Toothless!" Hiccup reprehended in an undignified squeak, annoyed that half his face dripped with sticky Night Fury saliva. The slobber beaded down along elastic strands of spit to his shoulder and chest, undisturbed as the boy dealt Toothless a futile frown which read, 'This isn't over.'

Ignoring the invisible daggers being thrown from Hiccup's caustic eyes, Toothless coiled up at one corner of the hearth, decided in dozing for a few minutes in the meantime. He distinctively heard something along the lines of, "...knows this doesn't wash out..." being muttered from the boy when he stomped up the stairs to his room.

"...ungrateful lizard..." continued the mumbling; the dragon snorted indignantly at the comparison between he and a tiny amphibian - he's a reptile, a dragon, not some common garden newt slithering on its belly.

The front door bashed open as the giant frame of Chief Stoick filled the maw, a burlap sack slung over his shoulder and a barrel tucked underneath the other armpit. The resounding crash from the man's entrance caused the grumbling and scuffling that trickled down from the loft to cease instantaneously.

Stoick the Vast, leader of the Hairy Hooligan tribe, dwarfed his citizens at an exhausting six feet and nine inches, cashing in at

three hundred meaty pounds of raw Viking power. The majority of his facial features disappeared behind the plaited mask of his illustrious auburn beard, adorned with many braids and ties to keep the clumps in order. He clad himself in an overlarge forest green tunic which tapered off into rhomboidal leatherwork, olive striped trousers, an elegant bear fur cloak that draped across his broad shoulders and affixed to his front by two plate-sized, engraved iron clasps, studded forearm braces, and a thick leather sash wrapped around his stalky girth with a bronze medallion emblazoned with a ferocious dragon. His prominent figure topped off with a bi-horned helmet which resided on the crown of his head, his daily reminder of his long-lost wife, Valka. Stoick's jade pupils quintessentially sparkled in merriment on most days, however the creases that lined his face became the tell-tale sign of the absence of any complacent mood.

Hiccup's father stepped inside completely, kicking the ajar door shut with his heel as he inventoried the interior state of his cabin with a critical eye, assuming his son would be waiting for him. His austere gaze landed on the napping Night Fury, failing to stir in his slumber from the obnoxious clamor that Stoick wrought. The presence of the dragon led to his logical summation that Hiccup should be nearby - theoretically in his loft if those scratching noises provided any indication, the chief pondered.

"Hiccup?" Stoick shattered the quiet atmosphere, the hush concealing that another person skulked upstairs with bated breath and trepidation, "Son? You home?"

The stillness lingered for another moment longer until the steady click-thump of Hiccup's footsteps announced his descent from his elevated lair, the stairs thudding ominously. The boy emerged at the bottom, uncertainty flitting across his face while unconsciously biting his lower lip out of habit.

"Dad?" he echoed, trying to discern the nominal amount of emotion embedded in his father's abundant wrinkles.

"Son," Stoick restarted, "We need to talk."

He reigned in his sonorous voice to maintain a controlled intensity, voiding all possible clues Hiccup could use to calculate whether he should stay for an imminent lecture or cower in consternation in his room.

"Sure...um, what about?" pried Hiccup innocently, following Stoick's movements with a timid stare as the larger man flung the burlap sack on his armchair near the hearth and stacked the hefty barrel on the rising pile which occupied the side of the room. He then shuffled to the dining table, plopping down in his throne of a chair that faced the fire pit and front entrance. With a wave of his hand, Stoick beckoned his son to claim his spot opposite of him.

"So, Dad," Hiccup broke the tangible tension nervously as he perched on the edge of his seat, intact foot tapping periodically, "What did you need to talk to me for...?"

The chief expired audibly once he buried his drooping head in his hands, before peaking them in front of his twitching nose in a flawless imitation of a desperate prayer to the gods.

"Hiccup...I saw you, this morning, goofing off over the village and trying to make me heirless doing one of your..._suicidal_ stunts," Stoick chose his words carefully; considering how loquacious he could be in his speeches to a congregation of his fellow tribesmen, the difficulty in talking to his son never ceased to plague him.

The boy, in turn, huffed his resentment to the topic, a recurring discussion he preferred to leave neglected. Here he goes again.

"It's not goofing off!" Hiccup reiterated forcefully for what felt like the thousandth time, "It's _training_, and I've said before that it's pivotal for our defenses-"

"Whatever it is, there is a place and a time for it," Stoick cut him off in a collected interruption, pressing his palms into the table's surface, "And that does not include shrieking around and nearly wrecking the village when you are supposed to be accompanying _me_ down to the docks to welcome the ambassador from the Meathead tribe."

Hiccup's eyes expanded at the reminder of what he unintentionally blew off, mumbling sheepishly, "That was today...?"

"_Aye_, Hiccup, and I have no doubts you conveniently forgot about this as well?" Stoick sternly posed the statement as a rhetorical query, irritation skirting his gravelly tone.

"It's not like I meant to-"

"That's not the point!"

"Then enlighten me, because the gods know you're emphatic about your points," Hiccup challenged sardonically, settling deeper into his chair and folding his arms defensively.

"You know why you must participate in welcoming visiting tribes!" Stoick snapped, his impatience with his son's flippancy brewing in a brimming pool of redundancy with the situation, "How many times do I have to tell you, it's one of the simplest and most basic responsibilities to learn in becoming a successful chief."

"Last time I checked, you still held that _exemplary_ title, Dad-"

"_You_ are the chief-in-waiting!" Stoick growled over Hiccup's dry remark, "_You_ are my successor! I'm putting in every ounce of effort to teach you - to _prepare_ you - for when _you_ take my place as Berk's chief - Berk's leader!" He slammed a balled fist onto the rickety table for emphasis as he finished, "Doesn't this mean anything to you?!"

The charged stalemate stretched between them as Hiccup stalled in responding, avoiding his father's expectant glare and instead focusing on the clenched hand starting to turn a vibrant shade of violet around the blanching knuckles.

"Dad, you know how I feel about being the future chief," the boy hedged, no more contrite in his apology for his subsequent

declaration, "I honestly don't think I'll ever be ready..."

Okay, so that may be a half-truth; Hiccup truly believed he would never be prepared to take up his birthright of chief, but not because of his less than stellar self-esteem, nor from timidity with heralding the taxing job - he just did not want to be chief.

At all. Ever.

"Hiccup, why are you doing..._this_?" rumbled Stoick fiercely, his robust jaw grating his teeth within the tangles of his beard, "Why are you rebuking your destiny?!"

"It's not my fault I'm your son!" Hiccup proclaimed with a gesture to himself, a scathing remark that earned a suppressed flinch from the chief, "And if it is _my_ destiny, then how come it feels less like a path of fate where I choose which direction I want to go and more like a chore list of your expectations that you've dictated for me?!"

His father pointed a stubby finger at him, elbow crammed into a sagging plank of the table's surface, "Your destiny has nothing to do with what I expect from you as my son - and that list of expectations has always contained precisely one thing: _obedience_!"

"You can't change who I am, Dad!" Hiccup shouted in imprudence before he realized he would reopen frangibly mended wounds, "Remember? All those years you tried, back when I was, in _your_ words, 'the worst Viking Berk had ever seen'!"

Stoick pounded the flat of his palm onto the abused table top and promptly rose to his feet, causing the chair to screech in protest across the wooden floor. Hiccup remained frozen as his father rounded the dividing furniture and stopped to stand beside the hearth, his expansive back facing Hiccup in his solemn vigil of the flickering light. His vast shadow engulfed Hiccup in darkness, and the boy didn't know he could ever feel so insignificantly tiny in the presence of his father. Drumming his fingers on his crossed arms, Stoick inhaled several deep breaths in a vain attempt to restrain his temper. His negotiative voice sounded strained when he addressed Hiccup again, the effort of getting his obstinate son to understand his position clearly taking its toll on his self-control.

"You're the pride of Berk, son, and I couldn't be prouder."

His father's blunt statement astounded Hiccup in its unwonted clarity - straight and to the point. However, that development didn't dismiss what he foresaw Stoick adding to the compliment, having recognized the dour tone from previous disagreements about the boy himself.

Lo and behold, the chief plowed on.

"...but you need to take my instructions seriously, because it does not matter whether you think you may be ready to replace me or not..." Stoick turned around gruffly to lay a poignant look on Hiccup as he concluded, "...because in time you _will_ have to."

The boy saw his chance to push his own agenda, which coincidentally would push the envelope on his father's tenuous patience, "Okay, fine, I get it. But like you just said, it would be _in time_. I

can't imagine you'll be keeling over any time soon-"

"Hiccup!" warned Stoick, unlocking his arms and flanking them on each hip, "Don't start. You are my only begotten son, and that means you are the last in the line of Haddocks - there are no others."

"But Snotlout-"

"Snotlout is a Jorgenson!" the chief yanked his helmet off in fractured exasperation and raised his voice, effectively drowning out Hiccup, "Just like Spitelout before him! They may be our relatives, but they're from Val - from your mother's side. And like your uncle would do anything for Snotlout, so will I for you, Hiccup."

Hiccup should feel touched by his father's sentiments for him, but his promise sounded oddly similar to a harbinger guiding the conversation along - as if his father planned to travel this path in their dispute on purpose, leading Hiccup to some unknown point...or deal-breaker.

Hesitantly, the boy also relinquished his seat, stepping forward to lessen the distance between them, "Dad...what do you mean by that, exactly?"

"My point before was that you are my only child, and thus only you can carry on the prestigious Haddock name into future generations," Stoick repeated, shoving his helmet back on and drawing his shoulders back to assume a resolute stance, "Therefore, I have decided you will be wedded by the harvest before your eighteenth winter."

Hiccup stared agape, the fingers fiddling with the drawstrings on his tunic going slack; but Stoick dropped one last startling proclamation on his son.

"And you will be betrothed by your seventeenth name-day."

Hiccup's jaw flapped wordlessly, an outpouring of emotions surging through him overridden by his momentary state of shock. He eventually worked his tongue into action, flourishing his arms around in unchecked anger, "W-What?! Betrothed? Wedded?! Dad, you can't do this to me!"

"I am your father and I will do what I believe is best for my son!" Stoick rocked the room with his explosive bark.

"So I don't get a say in this, at all?!" yelled Hiccup, gesticulating furiously at nothing in particular, "I'm even less ready to be married than to be chief!"

"And being with a woman will help you to oblige by your responsibilities!" Stoick reasoned harshly, clasping his hands behind his back as he paced before the hearth.

"Oh, right, because there is a sprawling line of girls who are dying to be my wife!" Hiccup threw an arm wide in the direction of the rest of the village.

"Well, if you do not sign a contract with a girl's parents by your seventeenth name-day, I will be forced to arrange one for you!" Stoick bellowed, his patience long since evaporated, "Be grateful I'm

giving you a chance to choose someone! _My_ father sure as Hel didn't bestow that privilege upon me!"

"Your father also told you to bang your head against a rock," Hiccup retorted under his breath, the sarcasm intended to further provoke his irate father.

Mission accomplished.

"HICCUP HORRENDOUS HADDOCK!" the chief roared, crossing the room to overshadow his uncooperative child, his temper finally snapping and escalating unhindered, "YOU WILL DO AS YOU ARE TOLD AND YOU WILL NOT DISREGARD THE SEVERITY OF THE CONSEQUENCES IF YOU BLOW THIS OFF LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE I HAVE DONE FOR YOU! NOW HAVE I MADE MYSELF CLEAR?!"

The boy's mouth shrunk to a grim line as he vehemently glared up at his father, wishing that for once he might be strong enough to throw a decent punch.

"Crystal," Hiccup spat bitterly, turning heel and storming up the staircase to vent in his loft.

Stoick's hardened gaze trailed after his son's departing figure until the click-thump of his steps faded into nothing. He inhaled sharply, closed his eyes, and exhaled an exhausted sigh. That discussion didn't go nearly as well as he intended when he contemplated the matter on the docks that morning.

One of the major points he wanted Hiccup to appreciate never left the tip of his tongue, even though it became pivotal in establishing his nonarbitrary decision. The chief retained an earnest desire for his boy to _find_ love, to fall in love with a girl without being forced to learn how after marriage; a scenario that rarely ever transpired within their Viking culture. He didn't give false testimony in saying he would do what he felt would be in Hiccup's best interests - but neither did he want to back Hiccup into a corner, with no avenue of escape. Stoick realized he played his cards wrong, and may have spoiled any chance for redemption with his boy; regardless, he reaffirmed himself in his judgment call.

Stoick acknowledged that no one took him for a fool; he noticed his son harbored a crush on the Hofferson girl. Who could blame him for his hopeful ambitions? All idiosyncrasies aside, at least the boy dreamed big.

Nonetheless, the inherent problem rested in the girl's parents, Halvard and Ragnfrid, because although they respected and admired the chief, the same could not be said for his son. Hal and Ragna persisted in being two of the few Vikings left in Berk who still allotted Hiccup a grudge, even after he ended the three hundred year war with the dragons and brought an era of peace to the island. Their heckling words stung Stoick's pride in his son each time the pair scoffed at the boy, but he couldn't justify himself to confront them and alter their callous opinion of him.

If Hiccup proved to be firm in his affections enough to seek Astrid's hand from her parents, Stoick surmised they could _possibly_ be persuaded - for a high enough price. The chief became aware many years ago that the Hofferson clan couldn't boast any outstanding

wealth, and they endured the Viking way of life as a poor family in the lower class. If his son specified a contract adequately affluent - and reminded them he is the heir to the chieftainship - Hal and Ragna might be amenable to betrothing their only daughter to him; a favorable outcome.

Scrunching up his eyes, Stoick rubbed them with a finger and thumb and pinched the bridge of his nose. Guilt gnawed at his floundering conscience, but he already dealt the damage, and he needed to return to the village square and resume the tour with the ambassador, who graciously permitted the inopportune hiatus for the chief to hassle with his son.

He huffed shallowly as he massaged the wrinkles on his aging face, until he collapsed his hands away and met with an unsettling sight before him.

Toothless crouched at the base of the staircase, digging a reproachful look into Stoick with his narrowed chartreuse eyes, growling softly. Evidently, the dragon became none too pleased with how Stoick browbeat his son, and made certain to impart his disgruntlement with the large man.

"Don't give me that," Stoick reprimanded the irritated Night Fury, hands resting on his hips as he stayed his ground, "I know he gets his stubbornness from you."

The dragon demonstrated his offense to the accusation, tossing his head towards the chief in retaliation, _'Hardly. That's all your doing.'_

Stoick grumbled an offhand curse before gesturing a hand to the loft, "Aye, go and see how he's holding up. Don't let him do anything stupid...or crazy." He couldn't rid the feeling that the dragon's penetrating gaze scrutinized every aspect of his intellect, judging him based on his shortcomings as a father and overlooking his titular virtues.

With a flare of his nostrils and a snort of disapproval, Toothless darted up and out of sight into Hiccup's room, where irregular stomping could be heard.

Stoick shook his head, muttering as the dragon scuttled after his compromised rider, "Condescending beast."

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The disheartened son of the chief seethed in his upstairs room, clacking and clomping alternately from one wall to the other. Hiccup wrung his quaking hands together, popping the individual knuckles in a cathartic release that mimicked squeezing a stress ball. Emerald fire crackled in his downcast eyes, the will to scream aloud becoming more unbearable by the second to bite back.

This is completely unfair! Hiccup's mind raged, thoughts racing in overdrive, the potential for dragon smoke to fume from his ears a growing plausibility as the boy brooded.

Who does he think he is? Oh, yes, he believes he's his father - well he could've fooled him! Come on, _marriage_?! The notion became

increasingly asinine as Hiccup paced, the mismatched thumping of his footsteps a comforting lullaby in his frenzied state.

There only lived one girl who Hiccup would ever dare to dream of marrying - and she happened to be the most daunting one to ask if he did. She walked in starlight in a faraway time, golden braid gleaming under the moon; now, she continued to perpetuate that stunning display of loveliness, but rather than the idolized valkyrie that distinguished her as faultless, she became his best friend who possessed her own drawbacks and imperfections.

Astrid Hofferson.

Hiccup understood Astrid's resolve in leading a single life, the shieldmaiden's path to greatness. Not even Snotlout could woo her to fall into the arms of a man - or boy - for the bar of respect she set for herself proved to be unshakeable. But the sad truth that the boy admitted to himself flashed like a lit brazier in the darkness of night: he would never love anyone as intricately as he loved Astrid.

His reverent fervor for the blonde beauty he initially put on a pedestal either simmered into a natural fondness, or bloomed into a passionate love. Hiccup's love for Toothless could not satisfy his yearning of social interactions alone, because they grew into platonic soulmates - not romantic lovers. Astrid filled that yawning void for the boy, although the affections he felt remained unrequited.

Gods, his father made everything so difficult! Hiccup ruminated spitefully. Pausing by the foot of his bed, the conflicted boy wheeled his boot back and propelled it into the innocuous bedpost, a kick of blind fury.

And a kick of blind foresight, as a jolt of excruciating pain streaked up from his stubbed toe to his seizing thigh. Hiccup cried out, grasping the tip of his boot with his right hand while balancing on his spring-loaded prosthetic, his plight aggravated with clumsiness once he registered the predicament commencing below. Hiccup teetered to the left, bouncing up and down to keep his swaying body from toppling. The precariousness of the situation exacerbated as the boy hopped more erratically in his unavailing attempts to not fall flat on his face.

Ironically, he overcorrected too far forward and collided with the floor - flat on his face. He didn't surrender his throbbing toe from his clutches throughout the comical dance, and pinched it harder as he lay sprawled on the floorboards, his rear projecting up into the air like the glorious mountain top he and Toothless orbited that morning.

The flustered boy half-screamed, half-gurgled into the wood, his despair muffled by the distressful position he landed in.

Hiccup screaming with his face crushed in the flooring and his ass bearing semblance to a galleon's splendid main mast, became the fortuitous sight which greeted Toothless when he emerged at the head of the staircase. The dragon blinked at the peculiarity of his boy, having trouble piecing together what the exact purpose of him caterwauling like one of those puny annoying dragons with the buggy

eyeballs could achieve.

A devious idea hatched inside the mischievous Night Fury's imagination, a chance to exact his revenge for Hiccup's earlier ridicule. With the stealth of a...well, Night Fury, Toothless slunk around the up-ended boy to his flattened rock slab that functioned as his bed. He curled up clockwise, then arched his elevated tail until it dangled flush against the boy's posterior salute. The dragon whipped his muscular tail back and spanked Hiccup's rear before immediately slamming it down in front of himself, fanning the good tail fin up to cover his face.

The unexpected sting from the abrasive contact wrenched another yelp from the boy's lips. He flung around onto his side, both hands gripping his sore backside protectively and drove a petrified scowl unashamedly at the perpetrator, who found it demanding to preserve his façade of false repose.

"Toothless!" the offended boy chastised the Night Fury, "What in the nine realms prompted that?" Toothless crumpled his tail fin down to reveal a dilated pupil peeking through the mass of dragon, until he straightened it again to hide his face once more. Hiccup could swear he caught a snigger reverberate from the provocative dragon.

Grumbling to himself, Hiccup exercised caution in regaining his feet - _foot_ - and tested out how much of his weight his injured toe could support. It seemed fine, not broken, but definitely would be sore for a couple of days. He wheeled away and began to march over to his bed - a mistake on his part.

As soon as the boy turned his back to the dragon, Toothless stole another glimpse at Hiccup around his scaly shield, and resolved to toy with him a little longer. Before Hiccup could take two steps, the dragon repositioned his tail behind the boy and smacked him one last time, for good measure. The impact sent his rider stumbling, and he would have banged into the side of his bed if not for his acute reflexes and lanky arms, outstretched in the nick of time.

Bent over double with hands thrust out onto the cot, Hiccup cursed in a winded cough and heaved as he swiveled his head to glower at the belligerent dragon anew. Toothless dropped his sleeping act by that time, blatantly staring at his boy with a smug expression.

"So, it's going to be like _that_, hm?" Hiccup threw down the gauntlet, standing and dusting off his palms on his vest.

Toothless craned his neck aloft, barking a series of four throaty croaks in quick succession - his rough imitation of human laughter.

"Gee, bud, I'm feeling the love," Hiccup deadpanned, the pessimistic attitude lost to the dragon in his moment of verbal identification.

At Hiccup's mention of the word "love", the playful Night Fury gathered up a mouthful of his flammable gas, before puckering his lips as effectually as he could and spewing the contents into the chilly, stagnant air. His head traced an invisible path from the center, leftward and back, then the center, rightward and back.

Although the sketch hung unrefined in the gap between the two, Hiccup could not resist a grin at what he beheld - a crudely drawn generic heart. The boy passed through the wispy gas as he knelt before his best friend, whose salmon tongue lolled out of his mouth.

"Aw, Toothless," simpered Hiccup, resting a delicate hand on each of the dragon's cheeks and mushing his face farcically, "I love you, too."

Hiccup received another bout of dragon slobber in appreciation, but this time the boy chuckled heartily at the affection.

"Yeah, yeah, you overgrown puppy," he teased, snagging the Night Fury beneath his chin with a learned scratch. The carefree joy wilted in recollection of his argument with his father, causing his ministrations to falter as he moaned softly.

"What am I going to do, bud?" Hiccup inquired of the dragon, for once seeking a genuine solution to his problem, instead of the habitual makeshift plans he became accustomed to devising. Hiccup hugged Toothless' thick neck and spouted in hysterics, "Dad wants me to get married! Married! And better yet, he expects me to be promised by the day I turn seventeen - wait..."

The russet pile of hair leaned back as Hiccup stared into the rafters, his mouth working soundlessly while he calculated some dates and numbers in his head. As a seasoned inventor, mental mathematics came naturally to the boy, and he never made an error in his operations.

"Three moons," Hiccup whispered to himself before reverting his attention to Toothless and restating a little louder, "I have to be engaged within three moons, Toothless." He forcibly swallowed the lump in his throat, attempting to quell the amplified anxiety that reappeared with a vengeance. The dragon warbled in commiseration for his boy, not quite understanding what made him so afflicted, but always willing to do anything for Hiccup to be happy.

The teenager speculated his options, and summarily blamed his father for cornering him. Stoick left him with no alternatives except for the longshot - or running away, however he could never do that to his father, no matter how fastidious he became. Hiccup slapped his thighs in defeat as he addressed his dragon, a nervous chatter pleading for comfort.

"If I ask Astrid to marry me..." his voice wavered until he breathed out, "...do you think I have a shot?"

The term "marry" meant absolutely nothing to Toothless, but he could perceive from Hiccup's askance and searching expression that the boy needed reassurance. The dragon closed his eyes and responded with one, firm nod. Hiccup smiled congenially and rubbed Toothless' nose, which coaxed his eyes to flutter open.

"Thanks, buddy," he murmured gratefully, his heart exploding with adoration for the onyx bastion, "You always know how to make me feel better, even about myself."

Hiccup rose and retreated to recline on his bed to contrive in peace, but upon sitting on his still hurting rear, jumped up with a shout.

His hands wound their way underneath him again, massaging the assuredly maroon cheeks.

"I'm going to be incapable of sitting for a week because of you," Hiccup chided Toothless, shooting him a condemnatory glance. The dragon chirped sympathetically and then offered a smirk which glinted from his rows of impeccable teeth.

"Oh, great. Dragon pity."

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><p>AN:** Again, thank you all for reading this hippopotamus of a story. I hope I conveyed the Haddock argument as authentically as possible, Stoick's inciting reactions in particular. This installment should clear up some questions about the overall arranged marriage plot - although I still have the ace (or aces) up my sleeve. Next chapter will include some Hiccup/Gobber bonding and a dose of Hiccstrid fluff! If you enjoyed, I'd love to hear it in a review. Diskonnekt out.

3. Chapter Three

A/N: **I apologize for the tardiness of this chapter, but unforeseen circumstances occurred shortly after the upload of Exorbitant Expectations, which has landed me in the hospital for an undetermined length of time. I want to thank everyone for supporting this story and helping to rekindle my flame of creativity - it means a great deal to me. Each follow, favorite, and review literally puts a smile on my face, no matter how insignificant you might think it is. Has anyone noticed the similarity among my chapter titles yet? Try to figure it out, and have some bonding and fluffiness to entertain yourself. This chapter is partially influenced by HTTYD's first deleted scene, "Axe to Grind".>

**Disclaimer: **I still own nothing that I've written and published on this website. Is this really necessary? I'm obviously not making any money off of this story. Dagnabbit.

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><p>Chapter Three>

"Of Marriage and Metal"

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Concerning his brideless nuptials, the gods spared Hiccup a scrap of good fortune off of their bountiful table of blessings, for which the teenager raised his prayers of gratitude to Odin, Thor, Freya, and any of the other gods he could pull from memory. Not three days after Stoick handed him his ultimatum, Trader Johann sailed into port for the final time before the ice set in, which would prevent any future ships from docking; a day later and Johann would be unable to access Berk's sprawling spider web of docks, no matter from which direction

he approached the island.

Hiccup wanted to design the oath bands out of a new and original metal, not the hackneyed iron riddled with impurities that the village used for everything, from armor and weapons to nails and hinges. He considered using Gronckle iron for its increased malleability, tensile strength, and brilliant luster, but that would involve asking Fishlegs for the correct combination of rocks to feed a Gronckle, which could easily scamper down a rabbit trail that Hiccup preferred to avoid. No, his project's secrecy could not be stressed enough, and disclosing even the vaguest of hints of his plan, especially to Fishlegs, spelled bad news in looming maroon runes for him. Hiccup harbored a kind spot in his heart for the burly encyclopedia of dragons, but the youngest member of the group just could not be trusted with secrets, no matter how recondite anyone presented the information to him - Fishlegs would spill the beans if captors only put out the lights.

Since Johann floated past the sandbars and weighed anchored along Berk's shores, the boy successfully procured an illustrious and exclusive metal from him, which the eager trader called "white gold". The brunet man informed Hiccup that its malleability proved itself to be tantamount to that of regular gold, but the chemical properties of this material caused the gold to appear a much lighter shade, lighter than that of even the finest Gronckle iron. The trader and the inventive boy shook hands on their deal, Hiccup walking down the gangplank with his precious bag of several grams of white gold while Johann stashed away another spyglass, another winch, and a new interlocking pulley system Hiccup designed specifically for his ship.

Over the next fortnight, Hiccup diligently funneled his best creative efforts into the pair of white gold rings and the ceremonial sword upon which he would pass Astrid her ring. Unfortunately for the boy, his increased time spent in the forge meant asking his second-in-command to take up the responsibility of teaching more classes in his absence - the fact that he named Astrid his second-in-command did not escape the cynical peanut gallery in his conscience. As shrewd as a detective could be, Astrid would figure out what exactly Hiccup kept covert while in the forge and not the Academy; thus, caution became his water bucket and any sparks of wheedling for information met with a terrible fate of getting doused. Consequently, as Snoggletog approached less than two weeks away, Hiccup concluded he needed to pick up the pace in finishing his project or else he would miss the deadline he set for himself.

Hiccup's heavy eyelids cracked a sliver to allow a marginal amount of sunlight through, only to scrunch tightly together again while his aching body squirmed into a more comfortable position. He didn't mean to drop off to sleep at his writing desk the night before, but his exhaustion and the relative warmth of his back room in the forge lulled his frantic thoughts into a sluggish stew, until his overactive brain finally checked out for the night. He would never admit it to anyone, but his dreams as of late almost exclusively featured Astrid: Astrid during training; Astrid sitting astride Stormfly; Astrid in a wedding dress...hold on, a dress? Hiccup recalled he never witnessed the blonde beauty in a dress before; the idea became alluring as his lips curved upward in his utopia of sleep.

Now, morning clawed at Hiccup's eyelids, demanding his attention as he twisted his arms beneath his resting head, crumpling pieces of parchment that portrayed various designs of the rings and sword which he partway completed. Outside, a pack of Terrible Terrors raised their voices in musical unison, singing a high-pitched hymn of unknown dragon origin from atop one of Berk's many house rooftops, but Hiccup didn't want to wake up; sleeping in never sounded so inviting prior to this instant.

From his left, the boy heard the curtain partition being yanked aside, and before he could move a muscle, the interloper declared his presence with a shout of surprise.

"Hiccup!"

The blacksmith's apprentice sat bolt upright in his chair to greet a bewildered Gobber hunched within the door frame of the work room, his metal hook still intertwined with the weathered drapery. Finding the boy slumped over in slumber at the forge became a regular occurrence during the previous two weeks, but it never ceased to surprise the master blacksmith, mostly because he could not wrap his mind around Hiccup's newly discovered determination with whatever he seemed to be working relentlessly on.

Gobber the Belch could be described as the epitome of what a Viking should look like after years of grimy war against dragons and other Viking raiders. Considered short for the average Viking man, his brutish figure halted its ascent at a reasonable five feet and nine inches, packed with two hundred and fifty pounds of elbow grease that proved its utility at the forge. He clothed himself in a sleeveless tunic of a faded shade of mellow yellow which tied off at the top with string, a chestnut bear fur vest that hardly stretched across his expansive shoulders, and long, pinstriped trousers which alternated between variations of olive and khaki, drawn up to his bulging beer-belly. His right forearm sported arm band wrappings, while a metal hub capped off his left as a replacement for his hand, which could be affixed with any number of attachments that Gobber created. In addition, a wooden peg leg replaced the man's right leg, which had to be amputated just above the knee after a Monstrous Nightmare ripped off the majority of it. A balding head hid beneath a customized horned helmet, concealing the little smattering of blond hair that his unibrow and braided mustache could not. The unequal serpentine cords of his mustache swung in front of a single, smooth piece of rock in the blacksmith's mouth, which acted as a fake tooth for the one he lost back when he could call himself "young".

"Gobber!" Hiccup parroted his exclamation, sloppily trying to hide his project sketches by bunching them together in a flimsy tower, "W-What are you doing here? S-So early, I mean?"

The older blacksmith eyeballed his apprentice's frenzy with his piercing lazulite eyes in a pensive manner before offering a reply, "Ye rememb'ae I work 'ere, dun't ye lad? Anyway, I 'ad t'ae wake up early t'ae deliver Mildew 'is third cart wheel in as many days. The old geez'ae breaks 'em fast'ae than I can make 'em." Gobber scratched his wide, bristled chin, reached out, and snagged the top piece of parchment on Hiccup's precarious pile, ignoring the boy's interjectory "Hey!" while inquiring further, "An' what 'as gat ye

so..._engaged_...with th'ae metal these days, eh?"

"It's nothing," the boy muttered, swiping the paper back and shoving everything into one of his desk drawers, "But I am on a bit of a timeline, so I should get back to work." Hiccup leapt from his stool and stopped in front of Gobber, tarrying so that the older Viking would understand and step aside. Instead, Gobber settled himself into a casual stance by leaning into the door frame, folding his barreled arms across his chest and giving the boy a nuance of a wink.

"Oh yea', 'cause yer slavin' away at th'ae thing, givin' yerself dark, baggy _bands_ und'ae yer eyes, an' leavin' me runnin' in _circles_ is jest _nothin'_." Gobber waited for the subtle hints to sink into Hiccup's brilliant head, but the grogginess which continued to cling to the boy seemed to be disrupting his thought processing.

"Erm, well...it's, um, it's something f-for a...friend. F-for Snoggletog! Yeah, that's it. It's a Snoggletog gift," Hiccup stuttered out, rubbing the back of his neck furiously as he tried to lie his way to freedom. Realizing his subtle prods of being "in-the-know" flew clearly over the sleep-deprived teenager's head, the older blacksmith waved his intact hand at Hiccup in a swatting motion, turning on his heel and trudging off to rekindle the hearth. Hiccup let out a breath dramatically, thinking that that would be the end of their wayward conversation, and followed the hulking man out into the main compartment of the stall.

"Hiccup-

"Yes, Gobber?" the boy sighed, unsure of what the older Viking would say _this_ time.

"I know 'bout th'ae engagement, lad."

"W-W-What? I have no idea what you're talking a-about, Gobber. Did Big Bertha knock you upside the head again?" Hiccup joked uneasily, sneaking a fleeting peek at the oath bands from underneath the leather he covered them with in an effort to afford them time to cool the night previously.

"Yer father discussed 'is decision with me befur' 'e ev'ae told ye," Gobber deadpanned, doling his abundant amount of patience with his accident prone apprentice, "An' if _I_ were _ye_, I would start takin' this mure seriously."

Abandoning his vain attempts to sidestep the impending conversation of marriage, Hiccup turned on Gobber like a starved animal whose dinner became devoured by a fierce enemy, "You knew about this and went along with it?! I felt you of all people would recognize how much I am _not_ ready to tether myself to anybody else!" Toothless growled softly from his lounging spot upon the stairs of the creaky staircase. "Except for you, bud, of course." The amendment appeased the Night Fury enough for him to drift back to sleep and his draconic dreams.

"'Ey, now, dun't go chewin' mah head off 'cause of yer predicament. Besides, I was on _yer_ side, tryin' t'ae get yer boar-headed fath'ae t'ae change 'is mind 'bout marryin' ye off," Gobber defended himself immediately as he dragged out a shield from the ever-growing pile of

orders next to the stall windows, "How else did ye think ye gat th'ae chance t'ae ask whomev'ae ye want before yer fath'ae picks fur ye?"

Hiccup unveiled the white gold rings from their hiding place and, taking a seat at one of the small tables that lined the inner walls of the forge, began etching practiced designs of Deadly Nadders and Night Furies into them. At Gobber's quick retort, he couldn't help but feel indebted to his master for the opportunity he gave him in asking Astrid, "Oh...I-I didn't know you were the one who persuaded my dad to give me time to ask someone first. Truly, Gobber, thank you for that; I don't know what I would have done-"

"Dun't thank me jest yet, lad," the older Viking countered, feeling slightly uncomfortable with Hiccup's sincerity. Being a Viking meant one never became immoderately emotional, except in cases with fury and bloodthirst, "But dun't waste this chance I've given ye. Ask fur th'ae lass' 'and befur' she gets any funny ideas an' runs off with someone like...Snotlout." Gobber said the pompous boy's name with unadulterated disgust, at which Hiccup inwardly celebrated.

"Who are you-" Hiccup began.

"Astrid, ye ninny! I may be down a couple of limbs, but mah vigilance is as keen as ev'ae," Gobber rebuked the boy, removing the shield from the crackling fire and beginning to hammer away at the dents and bruises speckling it, "I've seen th'ae way ye look at Astrid..."

Hiccup paused in his intricate carving to throw the man a poignant glare, his emerald pupils dilating from the harsh contrast between his shadowed corner and Gobber's silhouette beside the anvil, framed in the early morning light, "Oh yes, way to get the mood back on track." His sardonic statement didn't deter the older man, since he furthered the punishing situation by wiggling his brows suggestively at his apprentice, riling up Hiccup's cynical side even more.

"Please, Gobber; yes, okay, Astrid is my best friend - next behind you, bud," Hiccup glossed over his apology to Toothless at the dragon's offended warble, "But she would never agree to marry me, even if she was on fire and I had the only bucket of water in town. I just can't believe - no, wait, I can actually. This is exactly the kind of move that Dad would pull on me, and so sudden at that!"

"Now, dun't take it t'ae heart, lad. It's 'is job t'ae be tough on ev'ryone-"

"I'm not everyone!" exploded the frustrated teenager, tossing his arms wide and simultaneously dropping his drawing utensils on the table top. Hiccup reigned in his anger as he puffed out an exasperated breath, mumbling, "But-! But, it doesn't matter. My father is just impossible to please." He turned around in his stool and resumed his needlework carvings on the rings, falling into a disgruntled brooding about the ultimatum.

The older blacksmith stopped smashing at the abused shield to give it a once-over, making sure to not let the idle talk lull into a strained silence as he retorted, "But ye are goin' t'ae ask 'er

parents fur 'er 'and, aren't ye? Ye 'ave th'ae largest followin' of tween girls on this side of th'ae island, an' yet I 'ave only ev'ae seen ye 'ave eyes fur young Astrid." He crossed the forged to replace the shield on the burning coals of the hearth to reheat the metal, hobbling along at a leisurely gait as he awaited his apprentice's expected sarcastic remark from the shadows.

"Yeah...yes, I suppose...I mean, if you count asking Astrid directly...as good as asking her...parents," Hiccup replied in broken phrases, not entirely sure of how Gobber would react, and as the larger man spun around to ogle at Hiccup's stupidity, the boy pressed on, "I just - I don't want to do it the Viking way. I want to do it...well, you know, my way."

Gobber's lower jaw unhinged violently and his fake tooth fell out. Bending over to retrieve the piece of smooth rock, the blacksmith shook his head in a sympathetic fashion as he attempted to dissuade Hiccup's outlandish idea, because nothing good ever came out of the youth's ideas.

"Hiccup, Hiccup. There's th'ae Viking way - th'ae traditional way, th'ae prop'ae way, 'owev'ae ye want t'ae phrase it - an' then there's yer way, an' yer way makes grown men...uncomfortable." Gobber straightened up, fiddling with putting his tooth back in its respective gap - the leftmost incisor in the bottom row.

"Speaking of uncomfortable, I'd like a new conversation, please," mumbled Hiccup, tugging charred leather gloves on over his calloused hands and grasping a pair of leaden tongs to transfer the oath bands back to the blazing fire in the corner of the stall. He didn't abandon them like he would if he needed to melt down the metal into one of the chipped clay pots; he turned the tongs around clockwise on themselves, desiring an even heating on all edges and yet would remain cool enough to keep the uniform circular shape of the rings.

"Well, I dun't know 'bout a new conversation, but I'm sure we can churn out a song that will lift yer spirits, eh?" Gobber declared cheerfully, snatching the glowing shield with his own pair of tongs and returning to the anvil to continue unleashing iron justice on it, in the form of his hammer attachment.

A displeased snort proceeded the older man's suggestion, and Gobber glanced at Toothless to reassure himself that the draconic sounding snort came from his apprentice and not the dragon. He rolled his lazulite eyes because of the stubborn boy; Hiccup certainly proved to be his father's son. In tandem with the clatter from his hammering, Gobber confidentially took the initiative and burst into song, his grinding voice coarse and out of tune from the aridity that cracked his throat.

"Well, I've gat mah axe, an' I've gat mah mace-" Gobber sang brightly until he broke off, looking behind himself and casting Hiccup a sly, coaxing grin to encourage him to join in with the next line of the verse. A brief hush ensued momentarily after the blacksmith quieted, and he incidently also stopped banging on the shield; the teenager felt his resolve to not give in to his master's antics crumbling, and eventually muttered an apology to the gods before raising his own voice, although with less enthusiasm than Gobber exuded.

"And I love my wife with the ugly face-"

"I'm a Viking through and through!" the pair of Vikings concluded the first verse together, Hiccup's tongue still carrying a better tune than the older man's.

"Well, I've gat mah club, an' I've gat mah bludgeon-" Gobber bellowed, diving straight into the second verse, high off of the exhilaration of singing his favorite anthem with his favorite apprentice. Hiccup reclaimed his unoccupied seat in the corner to finish the finer details of the oath bands, which required him to etch the Norse runes into the cooling white gold material.

"And sixty Berserkers locked in my dungeon-"

"I'm a Viking through and through!" the man and boy belted the resounding motif, Hiccup finally perceiving his mood lightening up from the dark murkiness of dread it previously ruminated in.

Gobber could recite the entire song by heart - all twelve verses, each ending with the same proclamation of being a Viking. Hiccup ultimately learned the full song as well, thanks to the numerous years since his childhood days of being the blacksmith's lone apprentice. Contrary to popular belief, the older man's moniker didn't develop from being a frequent nor tremendous burper; in fact, he only properly belched after slaking his drunken thirst with too much ale. No, Gobber the Belch became Gobber the Belch because of his method of delivery when he cried his voice hoarse - he practically belched out the jocular verses, mistuned and mistimed worse than any other crowing Viking in Berk. And there could be nothing better than a poorly sung edda escaping the confines of the blacksmith's forge, according to a sooty and tipsy Gobber in the Mead Hall after performing a rendition of his infamous "One Viking Spectacular".

"Well, I've gat mah bow, an' I've gat mah shield-"

"And the Outcasts' heads staked out in the field-"

"I'm a Viking through and through!"

"Well, I've gat mah sword, an' I've gat mah spear-"

"And in victory's spoils we raise our cheer-"

"I'm a Viking through and through!" Hiccup and Gobber elongated the words of the final verse to add a monumental feeling to the lackluster scenario of their unsynchronized voices cracking in between the clashes of metal striking metal in the serenity of the morning. The pair of Viking songbirds dissolved into an uproar of carefree laughter at the recognition that they sang all twelve verses of the anthem at the top of their heaving lungs, and ergo the caterwauling undoubtedly carried on the stiff breeze throughout the small village. People must have been pondering what in Midgard could make such an atrocious noise. Toothless grumbled with perturbation at the blacksmith's and his apprentice's shenanigans, flopping onto his side with his spine-riddled back facing the anterior of the forge.

Hiccup, standing, but bent over double in his uncontrollable

guffawing, wiped a tear of mirth from his cheek when he suddenly heard the clapping of slowly distended applause from a pair of petite hands ring out from behind him. He, along with a chortling Gobber, whirled about to behold the intruder of their happy-go-lucky atmosphere within which they shrouded themselves.

The blatant interruption came from none other than a blonde-haired valkyrie, a smirk playing on her lips as she leaned sideways against one of the horizontal corner supports upholding the roof of the forge. Astrid Hofferson somehow managed to retain her thin figure, gaining a meager bulk of ten pounds in exchange for growing a couple of inches in height; however, the sobering reality remained that Hiccup Haddock now stood taller than her - something the chief's son became quite proud of when they discovered it. The girl's penetrating aquamarine gaze leapt from the apprentice to the master and back once more, analyzing the situation with a stern, yet cordial, eye.

Upon witnessing the source of the clapping emanating from Astrid, Hiccup sprang into action by seizing the discarded leather drapery and throwing it over the pair of nearly perfect rings, enveloping the circlets in their familiar rustic hiding place. He eased out a sigh and praised himself for his quick reflexes, turning back to the literal girl of his dreams with a tentative relaxation crawling up his spine - his lax impression didn't last long.

"What a lovely duet," Astrid complimented in mock admiration, her grin becoming more difficult to suppress when Hiccup's cheeks flushed into a pair of ripe tomatoes and his hand instinctively rubbed his neck. The girl stood framed in the daylight, the sun glowing off her flaxen hair and shining more brilliantly right then than Hiccup could recollect in recent memory; he didn't utter a single word to her, and instead gawked with awe at the angel before him. Gobber clattered his shield against the anvil aggressively, hoping to jar the romantic boy out of his spontaneous dreaming and actually take care of their customer. The impromptu noise did the trick, as Hiccup's lopsided smile slid from his face, the foggiess dissipated from his clouded eyes, and he began stammering to the exquisite girl across the stall from him.

"A-Astrid! Hey, Astrid, h-hello there! Welcome! What can I do for you t-today?"

Astrid's arm wound itself over her shoulder and unclasped her trusted double-bladed battle-axe from her back, giving it a whirl in her dominant right hand while responding, "Hey, Hiccup! Can I get this sharpened? I was about to go train, but I noticed the edges are dull and I seem to have misplaced my whetstone."

The enraptured boy ruefully picked that moment to begin stumbling towards Astrid as well as over his own words, iterating a string of incomprehensible sounds that no sane man would be capable of translating. Taking pity on the hapless boy, Gobber jumped into the exchange with a gleeful grin while setting the renovated shield aside, "Of course, lass! Mah, uh, manly apprentice 'ere will service all of yer needs." The older Viking pushed the skinny teenager in front of Astrid, and then realized the two of them continued to stare at him because of his tactless intrusion into their adolescent conversing, "I jest 'ave t'ae...go..." he himself started fumbling with his words, picking apart his brain for an excuse to leave, "Get...some...yeah, I'll jest step outside." Gobber

shrank backwards into the depths of the forge, disappearing through the back entrance and hobbling off to tinker with Big Bertha to keep himself occupied.

Hiccup, personally embarrassed by Gobber's strange interactions and even stranger exit, gestured an open-palmed hand in the direction the blacksmith vanished and merely stated, "Gobber", as if saying his name proved reason enough to justify the man's bizarre actions. Astrid simply chuckled at the boy's reaction to his kook of a metal master.

"So, uh..." Hiccup cleared his throat in the swiftly stagnating air settling between the two teenagers, until he held out his hands to receive his charge. Astrid twirled her axe in her skilled palm one last time before passing the weapon to Hiccup. The axe, particularly the reported dull double-edged blade, weighed a considerable amount in the boy's lanky arms, and although his stature faltered a degree from bending his knobbly knees to recuperate from the ample change in weight, Hiccup inwardly glowed in triumph at not having dropped his crush's most prized possession.

"Okay, one razor-sharp battle-axe, coming right up, milady," he gasped aloud as he lugged the weapon over to the grinding wheel in the center of the outside patio of the forge, near the anvil and the abandoned shield.

"Careful!" Astrid called after him, a stitch of parental worry for her axe in her brow, "That's my mother's. And why do you call me that?"

"Call you what?" inquired Hiccup breathlessly, already busy winding up the stone wheel with the manual lever, his biceps and triceps bulging unnoticed beneath his tunic and worn apron in the taxing endeavor.

"Milady," came the strong reply, and while Astrid distracted herself with grazing her fingers across the various sword blades, spear points, and axe halves which lined the cluttered walls of the stall, she elaborated before Hiccup could answer, "Because I'm not your lady, I'll have you know. I'm nobody's lady."

The reverberating clunk of the axe blade on the grinding wheel became Hiccup's initial nonverbal retort for the girl's heart-wrenching remark, but he coughed unnecessarily and provided a verbal response for her benefit, "W-Well, obviously you're not m-my lady! That aside...you are my friend, a-and you just happen to be...a-a girl-"

At this, Astrid twisted her torso about with her spaulders and golden braid slapping her skin with a clatter, shooting Hiccup a dangerously querying look, daring him to continue with that line of talk. The sudden movement caught the boy's attention, and realizing what he might have possibly implied, his eyes widened in shock and he melted under her stringent stare, feeling compelled to stutter out some kind of excuse to cover up his error.

"I-I-I mean, n-not like that! Believe you me, I would never insinuate you are that, I - just - but, you are...female...!" Hiccup felt oddly restrained with not being able to use his hands to gesticulate wildly in his anxiety, considering they were preoccupied with

clutching at Astrid's battle-axe. During his nervous stammering, Astrid completely spun her body to face the boy, and - Hiccup swore she did it on purpose - strode slowly forward to him, Hiccup only noticing the tiny sway in her hips. Her frosty glower, however, spelled murder if he didn't correct his misstep.

"What am I?" Astrid halted a couple inches from Hiccup, the girl's clean face hovering close enough to the boy's dirty face that they could feel the breath from each other exhales on their skin, "Again?"

Hiccup licked his lips anxiously, taking extra care to not spew any spit into his crush's expectant face, and muttered uncertainly, "Uh...a-a woman?" He scrunched his eyes tightly shut, anticipating his shoulder encountering a violent fist from the girl.

Rather than a violet and amber bruise blooming on his arm, the boy escaped unscathed when he detected a barely audible giggle slip from the girl's mouth, throwing him out of his element. Astrid Hofferson didn't giggle, leastways not at an unfortunate time when she should be pummeling her toothpick of an adversary to a pulp. Taking a risk, Hiccup squinted through his eyelashes with his teeth bared in a grimace to a, dare he say it, gorgeous sight - Astrid's face beaming from a small, true smile, with her aquamarine pupils like sparkling water in the summertime's icy meltdown.

"You, sir, are way too easy," her tongue slithered, enjoying the curious effect she caused her best friend and skipped back a step, "...to intimidate." Astrid gently - excessively gently - smacked the boy's shoulder with the back of her hand and attempted to reassure him, "Come on, lighten up, dragon boy. I'm just messing with you. Besides, there's no reason to emphasize that one of your best friends has breasts unlike you."

With that declaration, Hiccup committed an even greater faux pas than insinuating Astrid and he might be an item, as his hormonal brain urged his eyes to slide from the blonde's face down to her endowed chest. Granted, the pair didn't bust her tunic's seams, but that never bothered Hiccup - he liked them small. In a providential turn of events, Astrid's attention already diverted to something on one of the higher shelves, allowing the teenage boy to rip his gaze away from the girl's chest and refocus on the significant piece of property in his grasp. Lifting the blade to eye level for inspection and becoming satisfied with the consistency of sharpness for that edge, Hiccup flipped the metal tool with a whirl of the handle and began grinding out the other side.

One edge down, three to go.

Meanwhile, Astrid sauntered to the battle-axe that hung horizontally from a legion of nails in the back of the forge, near the overlarge bellows which blew air into the coals of the fire. There developed only one problem for the girl as she approached the glinting weapon - someone, Gobber most likely, situated the axe just out of Astrid's reach, no matter how far over she leaned on the table beneath and outstretched her hand. In her fruitless endeavor to pull the axe off the wall, muttered gasps and groans escaped her lips and sliced through the monotony of the grinding wheel's whine, her determination unyielding.

Hearing her small noises of frustration float from behind him, Hiccup tossed his head to the side - inadvertently making his auburn hair flip - and opened his mouth to ask Astrid if he could help her with anything, despite acknowledging that he would receive a fierce negative in retort. He didn't anticipate on Astrid's rear bent towards him while balancing on tip-toe. Hiccup's breath hitched in his windpipe when his mind recognized her tunic riding up the small of her back, revealing a sizable portion of smooth skin and could that be-

The boy's grip on Astrid's blade slackened, and with a startled cry of alarm, the half-sharpened battle-axe shot forward, complying with the direction that the grinding wheel spun and flying forward. Incidentally, the grinder happened to be revolving towards Hiccup, not away; so as the weapon departed from his relaxed clutches, the flat of the axe slammed square into his face. He shouted from the astounding pain, but gravity took effect before he could react with the weapon falling handle first to the ground, where the butt smashed his good right foot and fortuitously his newly healed large toe.

The boy staggered back while he reeled from how fast everything just transpired around him. Pain didn't register from his toe to his brain as far as Hiccup could tell, with his spacing eyes beginning to white out from his head's impact with the blade. Sound muffled all about his pounding ear drums as a frantic Astrid entered his fading view, concern splashed across her furrowed brows and searching eyes. She snatched him by his arms and shook him urgently, but Hiccup couldn't bother himself to care about focusing on her; instead his gaze became glued to her now succulent looking lips, dancing in rhythm as they repeated the same two syllables like a mantra.

"...ic...up...!"

Ickup? Pick up? Pick up what? He would definitely want to pick up a certain something - someone - if that happened to be what she desired, Hiccup's jumbled up mind slurred among the collection, processing, and comprehension of outside signals in its compromised state. His brain seemed to be having more difficulty stringing a succession of related thoughts together as he progressively succumbed to the void of blank space surrounding him.

Sight and sound altogether vanished, leaving Hiccup in a whitewashed world of empty oblivion for several seconds, until eventually a black dot blossomed in the middle of his vision. The world of noises and colors rushed towards him as if he decided to peek through one of his spyglasses backwards, and then someone grabbed his mob of hair and violently yanked back with unbelievable force. He daydreamed that Astrid revealed herself to be the one whose hand caressed his russet hair.

"Hiccup Haddock!"

At hearing his clan name being used, the teenager wagged his head from side to side, blinking rapidly and causing the remnants of his whiteout to disperse. He took in the strained faces of his two best friends, Astrid and Toothless, once he became cognizant of where he resided. Toothless sniffed and nudged at Hiccup's chest, hoping for any sign of positive feedback from the stationary boy; the dragon felt relief course through him when his rider raised his left hand

and gave him an appreciative scratch under the chin. Toothless warbled sympathetically at Hiccup's plight.

Astrid would not be as easily appeased, her short temper flaring up from the superfluous fright that Hiccup struck in her with his stupidity.

"Ugh, Hiccup! Don't do that ever again!" the blonde girl nearly screamed and accentuated each word with a stiff punch into his right arm, "And all of those are for scaring me!" Hiccup offered her a weak-willed smile as she glared vehemently up - only a couple of inches she reminded everyone - at him. His large toe throbbed in agony, reminding him that he did accidentally drop Astrid's axe.

"Um, sorry-" the wistful boy apologized humbly and pointed downward timidly before kneeling and heaving the weapon into his gangly embrace once more. The corner of Astrid's mouth curled in an agitated grimace until she spun on her heel and shuffled through some leather scraps on a side counter, allowing Hiccup to replace the thankfully undamaged battle-axe onto the grinding wheel and resume his meticulous work.

A brief reprieve cascaded Hiccup's frazzled mind during the time that Astrid idly fooled around with the mounds of supposed junk on the tables, and before he knew it he laid the final edge of his charge on the grinder. Whenever Hiccup worked on anyone's weapons whom he knew personally, such as his dad or the rest of the gang, he discovered that he never spent as much time smoothing out the kinks or correcting the imperfections of their weapons as he did in comparison to Astrid's valued double-bladed battle-axe. Whenever that marvellous weapon - that he made for her all those years ago - came into his custody, he treated it with the utmost care and respect that a blacksmith would have for his signature masterpiece. The charge's owner, on the other side of the stall, neared the bottom of one of the piles of miscellaneous paraphernalia, and when she removed a considerably darkened tatter of leather from it, Astrid found a magnificent weapon that she should never have uncovered.

"Hiccup..." the girl murmured, eyelashes batting in unfettered wonder, taking the buried weapon with both hands and reverently gliding her finger pads over it, "This...this is beautiful..."

The apprentice spared a glance at his crush to discover with horror that the object she withdrew from the depths of rags and parchment proved to be none other than the ceremonial sword he halfway finished for his impending wedding - the same sword which would hopefully pass into the Hofferson clan! Hiccup decided beforehand that he would forge his own sword for the marriage ceremony, because no matter how much he enjoyed fantastic adventures, he couldn't bring himself to go graverobbing in the crypts for his family's ancestral broadsword.

And Astrid could not have said it any better; the sword dazzled her eyes in its beauty and craftsmanship. The thinly crafted blade and fuller extended for three feet to a sharp point, in likeness of a rapier, made of a purified mixture of iron which he boiled down from old scrap metal. Hiccup designed and created the hilt with the leftover white gold material from the oath bands - the guards spanned an impressively near foot in length, and the pommel a thick, sturdy

ball of iron at the butt of the grip which showed the boy's eye for detail with the incipience of runic etchings circumnavigating it. Astrid assumed the runes wrote out a traditional blessing to bestow good fortunes and luck upon the family who owned the weapon, and hence she didn't bother to read what the inscription actually read.

What caught Astrid's undivided attention, though, revealed itself to be azure and gold dragon scale shards that decorated various parts of the hilt and all along the fuller. Specifically, azure and gold _Deadly Nadder_ scale shards. The teenage girl's mouth formed a round "O" as she inspected the marvelous weapon she held, fingers gracefully rubbing every inch of metal. These scales appeared quite similar to those on her own Nadder, Stormfly, the girl mused silently in her mind.

"That-!" Hiccup started quickly, willing himself to remain calm to avoid another embarrassing moment in front of Astrid, "...is supposed to be a secret. Y-You shouldn't have found that."

"It's clearly not meant to see battle," Astrid deduced from her perceptions, "Which can only mean that this is a ceremonial sword... Oh my gods, Hiccup, who's getting married?! I haven't heard about any engagements recently!"

The boy racked his brain for a decent enough lie to slip to the blonde, and reduced himself to the easy way out in fake admittance, "I'm not allowed to say."

"Hiccup," she whined pathetically, always a sucker for the latest gossip that pervaded the village if it didn't include her.

"No, Astrid, I can't."

"I just want to know who. Only _two_ names! You can spare me that, can't you?" Astrid stuck out her bottom lip to feign a pout, but Hiccup had more reason to keep his "secret" from her than the innocent girl could have guessed. He needed to steer this perilous prattle away from _who_ would be getting married and onto a subject not as conducive of lying on Hiccup's part.

"No, not really," Hiccup mentally kicked his backside for the continued lying, "I was sworn to secrecy, and if I were to tell a single person, I'm afraid of the punishments he might have compounded on me. The guy really wants to keep this on the down-low. Besides," he became floored with a look of utter confusion as he thought of a diversion from the current conversation, "How did you know _I_ made that sword, and not, say, Gobber?"

Astrid grasped the grip snugly in her hand and sparred with an invisible opponent via a series of strikes and jabs before replying pointedly, "Because Gobber, while he is a superb blacksmith, only does the basics in crafting weapons - he pays no dues to details on his projects. You," she whirled and pretended that a second vicious enemy entered the scene to cut her down, "On the other hand, are meticulous, and compulsive when it comes to perfection. You can create things that I could never think to dream of."

The boy slumped speechless over the grinding wheel for a few moments, astonished at the compliment she afforded him, especially about

something as ignoble as his blacksmithing skills. Astrid parried off her nonexistent attackers and turned to see a sheepish grin creep onto Hiccup's mouth, and she couldn't help her own smile that mirrored his, while her tightened heartstrings endured another tug and vibration. She never understood what this feeling meant, the foreign experience not commencing itself until after Hiccup ended the war on dragons. Did her heart know, and her brain never became accustomed to deciphering what her heart tried to whisper to her?

"Well...thanks," responded Hiccup, still sporting that goofy grin that never failed to confound Astrid's insides into thinking they contained baby dragons within themselves. The auburn-haired teenager removed the battle-axe one last time from the wheel and held it aloft, providing a definitive inspection of his sharpening work, and approved of what he observed. Holding the weapon with two hands again, Hiccup paced over to Astrid and extended the finished tool out for her to reclaim, with a solitary word on his tongue.

"Trade?"

Astrid contained a snigger and flipped the sword sprightly in midair, catching it by the rapier-thin blade, and offered the weapon out to Hiccup, hilt first. He rolled his eyes at the energetic girl showing off the results of years of toiling through personal training, wrapping his gloved hand around the grip while Astrid snatched her axe away. Hiccup cut through the forge and passed behind the curtain to his work area, returning moments later empty-handed and stopping short at the miniscule frown drawn on Astrid's lips.

"This feels different," she speculated, slipping her fingers smoothly around the handle in a practiced twirl and passing the axe to her other hand without breaking form. She looked to Hiccup with a blank expression and a sketch of askance flitting across her facial features, lending credence to his return to stammering in his desire to defend himself.

"Oh! Yeah, I rebalanced it - tightened it up. Finessed it..." Hiccup explained hurriedly, gesturing habitually and hoping that improving her prized weapon beyond a plain and simple grinder sharpening might somehow impress Astrid. He really began laying it on thick when he declared, "We're a full service outfit here."

"All right," Astrid dismissed, reaching her hand into her side pouch to retrieve some coins to pay Hiccup for his services, "How much do I-?"

"Oh, uh, nothing!" he cut her off, wanting to maintain this affability between them, "You don't owe me anything."

"But you just-"

"It was nothing, honest-"

"I still want to-"

"Astrid-"

"_Hiccup_" the intonation in her voice rose to a threatening

elevation.

"Just consider it on the house!" he remarked in an elevated tone to drown out Astrid's insistence, grinning widely and thoughtlessly adding, "Or as an early Snoggletog present!" Hiccup mentally berated himself for mentioning "Snoggletog" and "present" in the same sentence in front of Astrid, unsure if she would care enough to give him a gift for the festive holiday. The girl didn't seem to notice his face contort with annoyance and fear at his condescending conscience, garnering a bit of subdued relief for him when she didn't pursue the topic further.

"Hm. Thank you, Hiccup!" Astrid sang her gratitude, resuming her survey of her newly repaired weapon as the boy shuffled his feet awkwardly.

She must have liked what she felt from her battle-axe and from Hiccup's rambling reasonings, because the girl eyed the boy shyly through her ripple of bangs before bolting like lightning to his side and planting a soft kiss on his left cheek. Lowering from the balls of her feet, Astrid whispered her appreciation to the stunned boy again and traipsed out of the forge and into the midday sunlight, the mighty warrior imagining herself charging onto a body-strewn battlefield, scarlet blood speckling the tufts of green grass like Snoggletog colors. She didn't ignore the tingling sensation that tickled her lips from pecking Hiccup's cheek this time; instead, she found herself wondering what it could possibly mean and if the feeling had a connection with the fleeting tug of her heartstrings or the flapping dragons in her gut. Her bafflement of the matter perplexed her.

Hiccup looked on dreamily after her while Astrid chopped off the legs of unsuspecting raiders, her axe flying around herself as if it became a third arm, or at least an extension of her two existing ones. She danced through the heart of the central plaza, taking out invisible warriors left and right on her way to the Mead Hall's grand stairway, flushing and prespiring from the exercise this spontaneous training conjured. The boy watched her figure ascend the stone stairs and dissolve into the yawning, dark maw of the hall's gigantic double doors, flanked on either side by a Viking statue with his tongue protruding grotesquely from his mouth.

"Any time," Hiccup murmured to himself, his finger pads grazing over the spot where her lips brushed his cheek, deciding that this encounter could be considered a good omen. Suddenly, a series of throaty croaks floated from the staircase in the back of the forge - a harsh, draconic mimicry of boisterous human laughter.

"Toothless!"

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><p>AN: **I don't know how many times I'm going to reiterate this, but I just want to thank all of my readers out there for sticking around while I battle these medical problems and continue to give everybody an enjoyably thorough storyline. Thank you! Next chapter we will meet the rest of the gang at the Academy, and the

moment you've all been waiting for: the Hiccstrid proposal! I adore my reviewers! Diskonnekt out.

4. Chapter Four

****A/N: ****Thank you everyone for the well-wishes and thoughtful reviews; I'm all right currently. This is my fourth trip to the hospital in as many years, so it has become almost expected. I admit that being bedridden for weeks doesn't bolster the creative juices at all, which is why I depend on you for support during my stay here. I'm still curious if anyone recognizes what my chapter titles have in common - thoughts? In this chapter, we'll start off in an Academy lesson with the whole gang and finish in the infamous cove on Snoggletog Night...

****Disclaimer: ****I would love to own this universe and these characters, but that would require me to have money, which all of my fellow college students out there know we never have any.

* * *

<p>Chapter Four

"One Snoggletog Night"

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"Why do we bother showing up on time when the Dragon Conqueror always shows up late?!"

Snotlout's bristling honk echoed and bounced off the walls of the stone enclosure of Berk Dragon Academy, where Hiccup insisted the day before that the riders meet up for a brief lesson, despite it being Snoggletog Day, the lone festive beacon to eagerly await in the midst of the winter season.

The five teenagers, accompanied by their dragons, trickled into the renovated kill ring over the spread of an hour's time: Astrid and Stormfly, fresh from a light training session, arrived first - unsurprisingly; Fishlegs and his lovable, chocolate and gold Gronckle, Meatlug, waddled in a few minutes later, the young boy with his button nose buried in the Book of Dragons - as usual; the twins, Ruffnut and Tuffnut, crashed through the chain-linked ceiling next, riding their shared lime and vermilion Hideous Zippleback, Barf and Belch - a common enough occurrence; and strutting in late, oblivious to his own hypocrisy, Snotlout's impetuous complaining racked throughout the Academy, with his fiery crimson and tangerine Monstrous Nightmare, Hookfang, in tow.

Snotlout Jorgenson's stature stalled at five feet and two inches, but his rippling muscles packed a hefty one hundred pounds and eighty pounds onto his stocky frame. He dressed daily in a sleeveless tanned tunic whose string bindings stretched thin from being forced over his bursting pectorals, umber trousers with faint lines of khaki, a coal-dusted vest pulled taught on his broad shoulders, a wide belt with an engraved tribal face on the metal buckle, arm band wrappings, and a ram-curved bi-horned helmet crammed into his short, brunet hair.

"Since you seem to not have noticed, you weren't on time either, _Snotface_," Astrid bit acridly, her patience on edge and thinning speedily with the pedantic boy, "And he doesn't call himself that!" Ever since Hiccup begged her a few weeks ago to lead in the instruction of his lesson plans, she garnered a new appreciation for Hiccup's qualities of character, his patient manner the most virtuous of his idiosyncrasies. Nearly three times she flung her battle-axe at Snotlout's smug face in the middle of her teaching without the supervision of the Academy headmaster, and only the imagined disappointment on Hiccup's face stayed her hand.

The ravenous teenager, turquoise eyes alight in flirtation, sidled up to Astrid while she rubbed at Stormfly's shimmering flank with a polishing rag and the dragon herself preened her wing. The stunted suitor put on his most fetching display and declared with biceps flexed proudly, "And yet I'm here and he's not! Who's the more reliable _man_ now, Astrid, hm-?"

As fast as a whizzing arrow, Astrid flung the dirty cloth in Snotlout's face, blinding him and leaving him unprepared for the crushing stomp that Astrid allotted his foot a moment later. The aggrieved boy howled in protest, hopping on his good foot and cradling the other, until the blonde bonked him on his helmet and sent him collapsing onto the arena floor. The twins barked with laughter from the other side of the arena - a duo of troublemakers who, although intelligent in their own right, loved everything involving the concepts of pain and destruction.

Ruffnut and Tuffnut Thorston, being unfortunate but grateful twins, matched each other in physique almost down to the length of their toes, with both maintaining lithe figures at five feet and six inches and weighing one hundred and fifty pounds. Ruff's attire consisted of a cerulean tunic with a tanned skirt beneath, a faded leather vest, sepia leggings and stomach sash, arm band wrappings, and a double bi-horned helmet crowning her triple-braided dirty blonde hair. Tuff donned a celadon tunic, a long, chestnut bear fur vest, charcoal leggings and a sepia stomach sash, arm band wrappings, and a double bi-horned helmet sat atop his triple-braided dirty blond hair. Around both of their necks, they wore matching dragon teeth necklaces, each twin secretly cherishing a symbolic half of the yin-yang of their sibling bond. The pair ended up being the second youngest within the group - officially, Ruff claimed to be two minutes older than her male counterpart, which Tuff refused to accept - both only older than Fishlegs.

Fishlegs Ingerman towered above the gang at five feet and eleven inches, tipping the scale at a meaty two hundred and twenty pounds. His outward appearance only showed an extended chestnut bear fur vest that reached down to his knees, charcoal leggings poking out from underneath, and a small horned helmet seated within his shock of blond hair.

The toppled brunet struggled to regain his feet until Astrid stepped onto his chest with her boot in victorious triumph, effectively pinning him down onto the stone. Fishlegs sniggered loudly at Snotlout's predicament from behind the hard cover dragon manual as he lounged against the snoozing side of Meatlug, while the twins continued roaring with unapologetic laughter and banging their helmets together in celebration. Bending over and applying more pressure to the unfortunate boy's chest, the blonde domineer simpered

and brought her face uncomfortably close to Snotlout's face.

"And yet you're down there and Hiccup is up here," Astrid finished with the ghost of a smirk as the aforementioned boy and his Night Fury padded calmly into the Academy, taking in the environment that seemed to break of the previously bottled tension with their underwhelming entrance. A belligerent chirp from the pretentious Nadder egged Astrid to snatch her dirty rag back from Snotlout's hooked nose and return to her dutiful chore of polishing her Nadder's scales when Hiccup cleared his throat authoritatively for everyone's undivided attention.

"Okay, everyone," Hiccup called to the others after setting down a bulging satchel he brought with him at his mismatched feet and briskly rubbing his hands together, "Gather around, the faster we get through this exercise, the quicker we get to go back to our cozy homes." The boy then knelt and began pulling out supplies from his bag while the rest of the group made their way towards him, crowding around to see what exactly Hiccup planned for them that frosty morning.

"What are these?" Tuffnut inquired mysteriously, picking up one of the elongated tubes from the pile. Hiccup didn't respond to the male twin directly, choosing instead to smirk at their inquisitive faces when he lugged out wooden bows and armfuls of sticks, which dribbled with an adhesive, transparent goo on one end and feathers jutting from the other end.

"Is this what you use to write with on that magic paper we've been trying to get a hold of?" Ruffnut pondered audibly, inspecting one of the goo-and-feather sticks before jamming it tacky end first into Tuffnut's backside. He squealed from shock and pain and twisted about to investigate what became jammed into his rear so suddenly, when his eyes lit up in excitement.

"Guys! Guys, my invisible tail became...visible!" Tuffnut cried out with unbridled joy and in his zealous curiosity, whirled around in place to grab at his newly "revealed" tail. Ruff cackled devilishly as she observed her brother's questionable antics, while Snotlout snorted with amusement and the other three teenagers just stared with withering exasperation at the scene.

"No - argh - Tuff, pay attention, please," Hiccup couldn't keep the strain from his voice, so Ruffnut lent her help to the distraught boy by smacking Tuff in the back of his helmet, knocking it forward and shielding his eyes. She yanked the stick from the boy's ass before he realized what happened to him, and upon resituating his helmet on his head, he discovered his "tail" turned invisible, rekindling his dormant anguish.

"I'll get you one day, invisible tail!" Tuffnut vowed with vengeance, contorting his abdomen and throwing a bitter glower while shaking his fist righteously at his stickless backside.

"Guys!" Astrid snarled with a curled lip, harnessing everyone's reverence onto her, "Listen to what Hiccup has to say before I throttle you in the next second!"

The boys fell silent instantly, twiddling their thumbs and shuffling their feet as if being lectured by the blonde warrior, but Ruffnut

exuded her rebellious side by poking her tongue out at the other girl - she still felt sour that Astrid kissed Hiccup multiple times and yet she received nothing from the auburn-haired boy. Astrid ignored the rude gesture, folding her arms across her chest and giving Hiccup her focused awareness to silent coax him to resume the lesson.

"Thank you, Astrid," the kneeling boy flashed her a meaningful smile, "As you know, more and more tribes are learning that Berk has made peace with and started to train dragons, and they will consider that as a power play if we ever have discord with another-"

"Wait, wait. What's a power play?" asked Snotlout obnoxiously, kicking a loose stone in Hiccup's general direction, however the tiny crags and erratic directions it bounced in caused the rock to veer and settle harmlessly near Fishlegs' feet. Hiccup sighed pointedly from being interrupted a second time in barely the span of five minutes by two different people.

"It's like an advantage that someone uses against their opponent - or enemy - when they are losing and are in desperate need to turn the tables," he explained to his cousin politely, "Now, can I move on to what we're doing today or are you going to waste any more of my time?" Hiccup's intended bite at the end of his inquiry resulted in the response he desired as Snotlout held his tongue and kept quiet. "Thank you. These," Hiccup held up a small fistful of the gooey sticks, "Are substitute arrows, which we will be using to shoot with today."

"Oh! So this," Fishlegs bent to claim one of the elongated tubes in his pudgy hands to examine again and deduced, "Is a quiver!"

Hiccup grinned at Fishlegs' intelligently agile mind, "Yes, that's right, 'Legs. Custom quivers with a layer of Night Fury saliva at the bottom of the base for these special arrows to rest in without losing their stickiness, since the arrows are also tipped with Toothless' saliva." The twins traded a mystified glance with each other as Snotlout appeared lost from the explanation; arrows were supposed to be tipped off with a metal arrowhead, not..._spit_.

"So, what are we shooting at anyway?" Astrid voiced the question that danced in everyone's heads, flanking each of her hips with her delicate hands. Hiccup's smile grew even larger on his lips as he addressed the blonde girl with a mysterious fervor, the aura of power dissipated entirely and replaced with a passionate prospect for the upcoming lesson.

"Each other."

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"Remember, this is an exercise, _not_ a competition!" Hiccup bellowed from Toothless' perch on the edge of the cliffside at the other dragon riders, "We need to be prepared for any tribe that declares war on us riding dragonback! That means air-to-air dogfighting without the use of your dragon's fire!"

"Hiccup!" Fishlegs cried out in distress, he and Meatlug sporting a dozen or so of the custom arrows which protruded from their rotund bodies, "Did you take a leaf out of Gobber's book on teaching?"

Because I'm seriously starting to question your methods as well!" A sharp twang vibrated through the salty air above the crashing waves as another gooey arrow zipped by and tagged Fishlegs in his expansive back once more, forcing a shout of surprise out of the boy.

"Yes!" the soprano's voice of the sharpshooter rang like a cheerful handbell, before long revealing the culprit to be Astrid when she and Stormfly fluttered above Hiccup and Toothless, "Now let's go find Snotface, what do you say, girl?" A loving scratch from the blonde caused Stormfly to croon with assent, and in the beat of a dragon's wing, the two flew off to speckle the burly brunet and his Monstrous Nightmare with the remnants of Astrid's tacky bolts.

A horrendous squabble of bickering split through the quiet atmosphere when a Hideous Zippleback zoomed unsteadily into Hiccup's view, prickled with several of the glutinous arrows in his body and his two riders hurling insults and provocations at each other.

"You're supposed to be shooting them, not me-!"

"Well, if you would let me drive-!"

"We share the same dragon-!"

"Besides, what if you get hijacked, I have to defend myself-!"

"Oh, please, you would get hijacked before me-"

Hiccup shook his head from consternation at the spectacle unfolding right in front of him, where Tuffnut kept aiming and firing his bow at his sister, but prior to releasing the string, Ruffnut would have Barf release a mammoth amount of his green gas to hide herself within. The russet-haired teenager cursed under his breath and lightly nudged his Night Fury to tell him to take off, and once in the air, Hiccup circled over the fighting twins.

"You're supposed to be shooting the other riders, not one another!" Hiccup called down to them, hoping to break up the skirmish before the ordeal became too dangerous for the siblings. Barf emptied out the last of his gas, sputtering and coughing, and unveiling Ruff in her crouched position on his serpentine neck; Tuff, now with a clear shot, let loose another arrow at his sister, which somehow missed horribly considering the two teenagers sat mere feet from one another.

"No fair!" Tuffnut whined with an infantine drone, and peered skyward with squinted eyelids to Hiccup as he pointed accusingly at Ruffnut, "She moved!"

Hiccup did not have time to disrupt the twins' rehashing argument, because he heard the faint snap of a bow's string and the whistling of a speeding arrow. However, his reaction time proved one second too slow, when a viscid substance latched onto the shoulder of his fur vest as he made to barrel roll out of danger. The boy released a suffering sigh and snap rolled to face the perpetrator, who turned out to be none other than the blonde warrior herself, standing proudly on top of a gliding Stormfly. Astrid flashed a grin at Hiccup's unamused look, her arm flying back and cocking another substitute arrow expertly onto her bow, ready for any stunt Hiccup might attempt to pull.

"What's wrong, dragon boy?" Astrid sang enthusiastically over the gale of wind, "You said to shoot the other riders!"

"I'm not taking part in this exercise, which I made quite clear back at the Academy!" reiterated Hiccup for the thousandth time, metaphorical feathers ruffled with agitation.

"My bad, then," she responded with a less than supplicating timbre in her apology, reclaiming her seat on her Nadder's colorful back. However, as she passed by unnaturally close to Hiccup and Toothless, Astrid snuck out her right arm and found the sweet spot her fingers searched for - the pad of skin in the boy's side beneath his ribcage. When she made contact, she twitched her thin fingers in a learned pattern into his exposed side, which earned her a cry of laughter from him as Hiccup squirmed out of her reach.

"I've told you not to tickle me!" Hiccup whimpered indignantly in between bouts of chuckling, clutching at his violated twitching abdomen to shield it from any more attempts by the blonde and her Nadder. Her touch coursed through his pale skin like lightning, jolting his subconscious into overdrive when he realized that only Astrid had that effect on him when he came into contact with anyone, "You'll pay for that one later!"

Astrid tossed her head to gaze behind herself at her assaulted prey, "Oh, Hiccup, don't be such a big baby - OW!"

A sticky arrow hung loosely from its mark on the underside of Astrid's jaw, and Hiccup followed the invisible trajectory of the projectile to the hovering Zippleback, where he observed Ruff lowering her bow. If Hiccup read the other girl's face correctly, the smirk that curled along her lip and the furrowing of her brows displayed both a demeanor of unwitting triumph as well as...jealousy. Hiccup wondered what Ruffnut would have to be envious of Astrid in their current situation.

Astrid pulled the offending stick from her mandible and rubbed the smarting red spot left in its wake, before glaring down with a crackle in her eyes at the twins, acquiring her next target. She raised her bow aggressively and drew, unbeknownst to Ruff since she became distracted with high-fiving her brother in camaraderie, both crowing with giggles from sniping the best archer in the gang. Astrid let her arrow fly with a shink, and the bolt found its mark within the braids of the female twin's hair and buried itself in her open neck.

"Ouch! Why you little-!" Ruffnut seethed with a reproachful growl, roughly dragging out an arrow to retaliate.

"Hey, that's my sister!" Tuffnut blared from his seat on Belch's neck, aiming at Astrid to seek judgment on her for nailing Ruffnut with the gooey stick, "Nobody gets to shoot my sister but me!" With that curt summarization, the male twin shot upward at the eclipsing Stormfly, but because he didn't lead the moving dragon necessary to make contact with her, his projectile sailed off harmlessly behind the Nadder.

"Shut it, Tuff! I'll defend my own honor!" Ruffnut roared at her sibling while in the act of sending another arrow Astrid's way, which

likewise missed its target, much to the twin's dismay.

"If you want me, come and get me!" Astrid taunted the other blonde, firing off another tacky bolt. The projectile floated on a pocket of air and would have dove straight into Ruff's unsuspecting forehead if she didn't slouch out of its path at the last possible second - and right into Tuff's flushed nose.

"Oh, I am hurt! I am very much hurt!" Tuffnut wailed dramatically, a hand clapping over his bullied nose to protect his most prominent facial feature and holding on for dear life to Belch's spike with the other. Noting the competitive spirits of the riders escalating, Hiccup saw fit to intervene in advance of someone being truly injured by one of his fake arrows.

"Okay, okay!" Hiccup lifted his hands and egged Toothless to dart between the two galling girls, both of whom appeared to be preparing for their own little war with one another over the-gods-knew-what, "We've been at this for several hours, so I feel more than satisfied in calling it a day. What do you say?" He offered a nervous smile to each party, swishing his head from side to side to maintain a balanced scrutiny of both of the flustered girls. It proved to be difficult enough to separate the twins from their quibbling and battling, however if Astrid joined the conflict partway through...there would be no knowing what would transpire once the dust cloud cleared.

"Fine," Astrid shrugged, dropping her bow but not removing the arrow from the taut string; she knew better than to drop all her defenses.

"Works for me," Ruffnut agreed, mimicking Astrid's movements but keeping a wary eye on the superior sharpshooter.

"Great!" Hiccup beamed with hesitant glee, until he became sure that the girls would cooperate with him, "All right - Ruff, Tuff, can you two go find Snotlout, and Astrid, you go find Fishlegs. Tell them the exercise is over and we're meeting for closing remarks in the Academy."

With each girl boring one final steaming glare into the other blonde, the currently converged group split apart to ascertain their assigned riders - Ruff and Tuff with Barf and Belch soared towards the absent foliage of one of Berk's numerous forests for Snotlout, while Astrid and Stormfly raced off southward to the jutting sea stacks where they last encountered Fishlegs.

Hiccup sighed with exhaustion, astounding himself with just how taxing of his energy overseeing this exercise became over time. In the brief respite he had before the other teenagers met up with him in the Academy ring, his thoughts strayed to what he planned for the forthcoming night in the cove, and he unintentionally began hyperventilating. The copious amount of anxiety that he smothered that morning when he awoke to focus on the lesson rushed back into his frontal lobe all at once, jumpstarting a panic attack in midair - a hazardous dilemma for the handicapped duo. He urged Toothless to circle down to the enclosure, and after bolting in through the open gate and into the ring, Hiccup slid off of the Night Fury's back and shivered uncontrollably while lying on the cool stone floor. Self-deprecating accusations tormented the inner sanctums of his

worried mind, every hurtful charge a giant brazier lighting up against the midnight sky:

'She's going to say no, and you know it.'

'Why would she ever want to marry you?'

'She can pick any suitor she chooses. You have nothing to offer her compared to them!'

'Don't even try. Don't embarrass yourself, fishbone.'

'Nobody would want to marry the village screw-up.'

Hiccup could feel his emerald eyes sting with tears against his volition, and he refused to let them fall as he gazed up blearily into the afternoon sky. A Viking did not cry, especially about trivial matters like a marriage proposal being rejected by the love of his life - crying did not offer solutions, only more problems.

Blinking back the despicable brine, Hiccup aroused himself and began putting random things away: partially to tidy up his Academy, and partially to have something to do to distract himself from his spiteful conscience. Even if he did believe the degrading voice in his head, which he tried not to on several occasions, more important matters needed to take center stage during his silent meditations. He didn't have time to worry about his impending doom; that could come later, after both he and Astrid arrived in the cove and he popped the question under the waning twilight sun. Hiccup smiled ruefully at the picturesque image in his mind's eye; he could only pray that the romantic setting would bolster a "yes" from the girl.

A rustling disturbance of dragons' wings flapping and slicing through the rigid breeze fractured the peaceful air when the five other riders dove and fluttered into the stone enclosure. Once the four dragons touched down onto solid ground, Hiccup commanded their attention for the last time as the teenagers fidgeted from astride their dragons' backs, keen to return to their warm homes and escape the chilly weather they endured for the past few hours.

"So, what did we learn today?" Hiccup inquired of his fellow riders, wanting to steamroll his way through closing remarks to prepare everything for later, "Anyone! Anyone at all?"

Tuffnut's hand shot into the air, and when acknowledged, he spurted, "Okay, so when shooting at something that's moving, you don't shoot directly at the object. For some reason, you have to not shoot at the moving object to actually hit it. Don't ask me why. All this thinking is giving me a headache. Where's Macey when I need her?"

"Not how I would have phrased it, but Tuff is essentially correct," Hiccup chuckled, delighted that the male twin provided a concise answer for a brief moment in his life, "Can anyone else tell me what we call this?" A stark silence followed the question in which the twins, Fishlegs, and Astrid loitered idly in boredom and Snotlout looked everywhere but at the headmaster, prompting Hiccup to pinpoint him, "Snotlout? Do you know what it's called?"

"Of course I know!" yelled Snotlout impetuously, exaggerating his pompous tone's grating volume to accommodate for the fact he didn't know and gesticulating wildly to supply emphasis to his empty words, "Everyone knows that! It's called...uh, it's called...Odin, it's on the tip of my tongue-!"

"Leading," Astrid replied audaciously for the bombastic boy without halting her nimble hands' ministrations on Stormfly's tired muscles.

"Shut up, Astrid," Snotlout countered in a small squeak, crossing his forearms defensively and shrinking further into his seat on Hookfang's neck.

"That's right!" Hiccup genuinely applauded the blonde's vigilance to his lessons, "And with that, does anyone have any questions? Questions that are relevant to today's exercise," he amended his query when he noted Tuff's hand creeping upward, which immediately faltered and fell ungratified into his lap.

Another round of hushed attentiveness circulated throughout the conglomerate, with an occasional curious eye darting around to penetrate the other teenagers with a daring glance. Hiccup gave a solitary clap with his hands and puffed his cheeks out with air, until he released the voluminous air from his balloon of a mouth with a quiet hiss.

"Okay then! That's all I have for you guys today, so I guess class is dismissed!" the auburn-haired headmaster concluded the abridged lesson, gesturing with his arms flung out wide, "You're free to go! Fly, fly!" Hiccup's play on words only registered a stifled giggle from Fishlegs, who turned out to be one of the few Vikings in Berk who truly appreciated puns and language jokes, stemming from how often the bookworm spent reading.

"See you losers later! Snotlout, Snotlout, oi, oi, oi!" the ostentatious brunet boasted proudly while Hookfang rose into the sky, hovering momentarily to cast his hiccup of a cousin one more glare of displacency before vanishing from sight, his repetitive chanting fading into nothing.

"Catch you tomorrow, Hiccup!" Fishlegs stated with intention, striding across the ring with Meatlug loyally at his heels, only breaking pace and slowing down when he passed by the twins and offered a timid smile to them. His proclivity to shy away from interacting with the twins made this tiny gesture of friendliness odd to the prying eyes of Hiccup - odd for Fishlegs, anyway.

"Yeah, goodbye to all, and to all a goodbye! Wait - is that how it goes?" Tuffnut wondered aloud to himself, goading Belch forward meanwhile his female counterpart appeared reluctant to move as the girl spared Hiccup an imploring look of fancy. Fishlegs noticed the female twin's face, and after wagging his chubby head from Ruffnut to Hiccup and back, he continued his exit and plodded off with a disheartened expression scrawled over his features. Immediately proceeding the tall boy's departure, the twins and their Zippleback became airborne and flew off in the direction of the village, most likely hoping to get some yak-tipping in before dusk settled.

Leaving Hiccup and Astrid to be the remaining riders left inside the arena, the stone and metal prison that entrapped the frail boy with his lifelong crush..._alone_. Hiccup visibly gulped and tugged at the collar of his tunic, mentally coaching himself until he garnered up the courage - stupidity, really - to trudge up to the flaxen-haired girl, whose diverted attention allowed him to inconspicuously approach without her knowledge. Hiccup glanced back at his dragon, to which Toothless threw his head in Astrid's direction as if to say, _'Go on.'_

"H-Hey, Astrid?" Hiccup started tentatively, his hand already winding its way to the back of his slim neck and rubbing it rouge.

Without halting her cleaning of Stormfly's mane of spiky horns, Astrid peered over her left shoulder from her kneeling position on the floor and acknowledged his presence, "Yeah, Hiccup? What's up?"

"C-Could you - _would_ you - meet me in the cove later? At sunset?" Hiccup could feel his palms beginning to sweat profusely, and tried to rub the dampness off on his trousers. This request, however, did elicit a response from the mindful girl, as she halted in her dragon's grooming and twisted to get a better look at the lanky, russet-haired boy lurking in her blind spot.

The question caught Astrid off guard, she could confess to herself; he asked of her some strange requests in the past, but this one gobbled up the cake. Sure, the two of them flew with each other almost every day, which always incorporated one or several races to specific points on the island, the cove included; but actually _meeting_ somewhere for no rhyme or reason? The blonde surmised that the whole scenario smelled inextricably fishy. Knowing Hiccup, though, led Astrid to not investigate further on the discrepancy by interrogating him; the boy may do stupid and crazy things, but the prodigy himself proved to be anything but dim-witted or maniacal.

She conveyed her acquiescence to his plea with a small smirk, "Sure, Hiccup. Cove, sunset. Got it. I'll be there!" Astrid assured the bashful teenager with a blinding smile, who responded to the girl's sincerity with a halfhearted grin of his own.

Hiccup released a sigh of relief after scurrying away from Astrid as gracefully as his prosthetic would allow and zipped away on a chortling Toothless. Next stop: the cove.

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The late Snoggletog sun's descent towards the tree canopy around the cove painted the sky in a brilliant palette of pinks, oranges, and violets, with the cirrus clouds tweaking the tendrils of sunlight into spotlight rays which Toothless unashamedly basked in. The playful Night Fury squirmed and rolled around on his back, relieving an itch in one of his spines, his thick tail smacking a nearby bush and sending aggravated pheasants into the crisp air. The onyx dragon watched as the birds, twittering amongst themselves, flew off over the small lake, where the unquestionably freezing water mirrored the canvas of the sky and reflected the shimmering light in a dazzling panoramic display. The serenity within the natural bowl became more palpable with each passing minute.

Sitting with his back against a boulder next to a warm fire he struck, Hiccup grinned with moot pleasure, and when Toothless turned to gaze at his, from his perspective, upside-down rider, the dragon cracked his signature gummy smile for the boy - a passing gesture of reassurance that he felt would brighten Hiccup's spirits. Hiccup's grin became a little more convincing with the encouragement, before his head fell back with a thud on the rock as his fingers fondled the little box in the inside of his fur vest.

Hiccup finished the oath bands the previous night - late enough to classify the time as early morning today - and the blacksmith couldn't help but feel a shade of pride in his metal-working skills. Astrid's ring, which took shelter in the wooden box in his pocket, combined the white gold metal he procured from Trader Johann, some dragon scale shards he filched from Stormfly's pen in the Academy while cleaning it, and Hiccup's personal flair consisting of fine etchings within the band. Situated in the throne of honor on the ring sat a gemstone - aquamarine to match the pupils' of Astrid's eyes - not huge like some of the diamond rocks his eyes ogled at, but not so minuscule that she wouldn't know it existed. Hiccup used his own hand as a template for Astrid's finger size; he and the rest of the gang compared hand sizes a couple of months back as the leaves began turning garnet and gold, and when Hiccup placed his slightly sweaty palm against Astrid's, he could curl his fingertips over the ends of Astrid's fingers, but their widths presented themselves to be similar, if not the same. Their pressed hands lingered in the air a tantalizing second longer than necessary, where something kept Astrid from removing her petite hand from his straight away.

With a shaking hand, Hiccup raised his head and slipped the ring box out of his vest, clutching the precious work in a viselike grip to prevent him from dropping it in the mud. He seriously needed to calm his nerves and compose himself before Astrid arrived, or else he'll be a wreck in front of her and ruin everything. In that instant, an idea struck him.

"Hey, Toothless!" Hiccup addressed his dragon loudly from across the cove, to which the Night Fury replied with a lilted warble of curiosity and a twisted slant of his triangular head, "Can you come here, bud? Just for a second, this won't take long."

Toothless crooned and wriggled with happiness, flopping onto his belly and bounding forward to his boy with a salmon tongue lolling from his mouth, tack askew from romping in the underbrush. Once he landed in front of Hiccup, the dragon sat back on his haunches, the scene eerily reminiscent of when they first officially met and formed their friendship. Hiccup chuckled quietly as he scrambled to his feet and fixed up Toothless's skewed saddle, the caring act in likeness of a loving mother combing out her son's messy hair. Satisfied with his compulsive nitpicking, the boy stepped back from the Night Fury and motioned with his hand for the dragon to remain seated in place, which he obediently heeded.

"All right," Hiccup steeled himself, clearing his throat and taking a determined step forward while puffing out his chest. He then seductively asked Toothless, who acted as Astrid's proxy, "Astrid, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

The dragon cocked his head to one side in mock consideration, before

his eyelids slid shut and he vigorously wagged his head in rejection, ear plates clapping against his neck.

Hiccup afforded his best friend a scathing glare and snapped, "You don't even know what I asked you!" The dragon merely lifted and lowered his bat-like wings in indifference - Hiccup inferred the movement to be an imitation of someone shrugging his shoulders. The boy gathered himself up and stretched to his full height, as high as his frail stature would allow without rising on tiptoe, thinking that imitating one of the more Viking-like Vikings would be more impressive to his crush.

"Astrid, do you think we should get hitched? You know, engaged, married, the whole shebang?" Hiccup inquired with unlikely bravado. The onyx dragon snorted in disapprobation, wisps of gray smoke emitting from his nostrils and vanishing into the thin air. Frustrated, the anxious rider folded his arms and drilled Toothless with a poignant glower, not particularly enjoying his stubborn dragon's evasion to cooperate with his practice proposals. The Night Fury did not appear affected by Hiccup's caustic silent treatment, which led the boy to quit trying to chastise him.

"Okay then," the boy recomposed himself before collapsing to his bony knees and clasping his hands together as if begging for mercy, and practically implored of Toothless, "Astrid, my father is forcing me to get married! Please, I beg of you to marry me!" This hyperbole of popping the question sent the dragon onto his back once more, quaking with bouts of throaty barks of laughter at his boy's desperation tactic. Hiccup regained his footing and brushed the debris off his trousers, rolling his eyes at the incessantly chuckling Night Fury.

"Yeah, yeah, laugh it up all you want, you useless reptile. It won't be so funny when that actually happens!" Hiccup deemed to predict, whereas a wicked portion of his mind nagged him that that would be exactly how the big moment would unfold; the boy irritably tuned out his disparaging conscience.

"When what actually happens?" a pristine, feminine voice punctured the relaxed atmosphere with her icy inquiry.

Hiccup jumped from the unexpected interruption, a series of shivers racking throughout his quivering body, and whipped around to find Astrid sitting comfortably atop Stormfly and quirking a blonde brow at his guilty demeanor. The boy shoved the box into its nesting place within his fur vest, bouncing roughly against one of his notebooks with a sporadic thud off the leather-bound cover. Astrid slid smoothly off of her Nadder and rewarded her with a comforting scratch beneath the chin, turning to Hiccup with a suspicious scrutiny of his fumbling actions.

"A-Astrid! You're here early!" he stuttered anxiously while wringing his now empty hands, but when Astrid's brow traveled higher up her forehead and her gaze flicked upward to account for the sun's position in the sky, he amended, "Uh, I-I mean, earlier than I expected!"

"Well, I did finish my chores earlier than usual," Astrid recounted brightly, crossing the distance between her and Hiccup - is she swinging her hips again? - until she recalled, "And what won't be

so funny when it happens?"

Hiccup's jaw flapped soundlessly as his brain sputtered for another story to fabricate and cover his tracks until the appropriate time, "When...uh - when we, Toothless and I, uh...fall! Out of the sky! Yeah, a thousand foot drop is not something you just get up and walk away from." Hiccup smirked wryly at the thought, because that scenario already played itself out once or twice before, a fact unknown to Astrid; she, however, took the irony as cynicism and punched the boy in his shoulder.

"That is not funny!" she chastised her daredevil of a friend, but when he licked his lips and opened his mouth to defend himself, she put a fine point on her stance, "Not. Even. Remotely."

"Ah, come on, Astrid!" Hiccup eased into the lighthearted atmosphere, feeling his tense muscles expand and relax while his constricted diaphragm inflated off of his internal organs, "You could say I was merely..._pulling_ your leg? Eh? OW-!"

The girl let her fist fall back to her hip and wasted no time in condemning Hiccup's words, "And leg jokes aren't funny either! They're actually worse!"

"Wait," Hiccup stopped her with a raised finger, "Making light of my disability is worse than positing a situation which leads to my own death?"

Astrid huffed out an exhale and folded her arms, but her Viking upbringing urged her to stand by her declaration, "Yes! Because your _disability_, as you put it, was an unfathomable cost you paid to save our village from imminent death; it's a token of your heroism. It's not like your leg just fell off."

"Explain _that_ to Ruff," Hiccup remarked sardonically, giving the girl a tumble of his eyes before pacing over to his stealthily crawling Night Fury, engrossed in hunting a lone butterfly residing on the bulb of one of the cattail shoots in the shallows of the lake.

"So...Hiccup, what, exactly, are we doing out here so late?" inquired Astrid innocently, watching and giggling when Toothless pounced upon his winged prey, causing a tidal wave to resonate out from his splashing and the auspicious insect to escape his paws unharmed. The girl trekked her way over to the remains of the other teenager's fire and dropped unceremoniously beside the dying embers, crossing her legs in front of her and commenting bluntly, "I see you built a campfire. Is this your idea of a spontaneous camping excursion or something?" Hiccup could detect a nuance of amusement interlaced in her inference as if, to her, camping with him would be a ludicrous notion, which put a damper on the boy's mood.

"No. No, not a camping trip," Hiccup admitted with less vigor, hedging her persistent question and posing his own instead, "And why would it matter? You've stated in the past on multiple occasions that my ideas aren't fun."

"Oh, Hiccup, don't take it like that," Astrid rebuffed his criticism sympathetically, "I was only referring to your idea about Night Patrol."

"What about Dragon Flight Club?" the boy retorted in a wounded tone.

"That, too."

"Screaming Death drills?"

"Of course! Remember what happened last time?"

He grumbled darkly, preferring to not remind himself of the debacle the last Screaming Death drill became. Not to be deterred from proving not all his ideas omitted the fun factor, Hiccup rebutted hopefully, "And how about the trust fall exercises we have during training?"

"No, that's just suicidal," Astrid conceded with a reproachful stare, her brows furrowed to accentuate her disapproval of the exercise.

Hiccup closed his eyes and sighed, pitying Astrid's fear of free-falling - she said that fear had nothing to do with her not having a death wish like he supposedly did. A soaking wet Night Fury tramped up to Hiccup's side, his scales sleek and shining from the twilight rays refracting through the dripping water; the teenager spared his dragon a generous rub on his snout and a one-armed embrace around his muscular neck. The dragon broke away after several intimate seconds with his rider, focusing his sights on the only other dragon in the immediate area.

Defeated in his bug hunting, Toothless thus waddled up to Stormfly, who chose to rest on a large boulder to preen her azure scales. The Nadder paused in cleaning the underside of her wing when the Night Fury drew near her rock, and the onyx dragon bobbed his head up and down energetically in greeting, ear plates flapping freely from the eccentric movements. Leaping down to the smaller dragon, Stormfly returned Toothless' salutation by bobbing her own head, whirring and chirping ecstatically to her draconic friend. Hiccup and Astrid observed their dragons interact in respectful silence, until the two scampered off together across the cove towards the opposite cliff face, mostly hidden by hardy grasses from the earth and naked boughs from the trees.

The young Vikings shared a baffled look before shrugging away their confusion; there seemed to be much more about dragon behavior they would need to discover before they could call themselves "Dragon Masters".

"Well, I requested you to meet me out here...because I have a-a...ahem, question to ask you," Hiccup relayed to Astrid, making himself comfortable in his metaphorical frying pan, nervous about taking the leap of faith into the fire. He kicked at the dirt with his prosthetic, drawing an unintentional line through the loose soil; he should have practiced his lines more with his fastidious dragon when the chance presented itself.

"A question? That's it?" Astrid asked dubiously, grasping to understand what would cause her best friend to be as stressed as he portrayed right then.

"Yeah, but i-it's a loaded question, I can tell you that much."

Astrid clambered to her feet, worry starting to dominate her face, "Hiccup, is something wrong? You've been pretty..._off_ these past few weeks. What is it?"

"I...I-I wanted to ask y-you if..." Hiccup primed his tongue for asking her _the_ question, but a lump in his throat prevented him from forming the words to voice it, "Ifyawoomareme." It came out as an incoherent, mumbling jumble of pronouns and verbs that translated more to the boy vomitting a distasteful verbose soup than posing an actual, life-changing question to her.

"Sorry?" Astrid pressed, hands on her slim hips, unsure of anything after the first half of what he said, "Could you repeat that?"

Hiccup's cotton mouth tickled the soft palate of his mouth when he attempted to speak again; he knew he could never be loquacious or produce an eloquent soliloquy out of nothing, but this choking and hacking on a simple query started getting ridiculous. Not knowing what else to do, the boy darted quickly towards Astrid, but upon swinging his left leg forward, the metal foot of his prosthetic hooked on an obstructive tree root. Struggling in midair for an extended moment, Hiccup succumbed to gravity's pull and fell down onto his bad knee, prosthetic splayed out behind him and his intact foot still planted firmly in the ground.

Astrid gasped at his pained grunt, hands flying over her lower jaw in shock, and began to rush over to help him up when the four fateful words tumbled out of Hiccup's mouth, despite the absurd one-kneed kneel his legs buckled into. The blonde girl stopped dead in her tracks when Hiccup finally flung himself out of the searing frying pan and into the fervid fire, the critical flames licking at him menacingly.

"Will you marry me?"

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><p>AN: **Cliffhanger! I'm sorry, I realize everyone probably hates me, but before you start pointing fingers: I planned it this way all along. Considering where we concluded this chapter, one can surmise what the next chapter will have in store. Oh, last chapter's upload broke one of my initial goals, which was for this story to surpass 1,000 views in a single day! Thank you _so_ much! Please leave a review for me, it truly helps me know if I'm on the right track as far as entertaining my readers goes. Diskonnekt out.

5. Chapter Five

**A/N: **Happy Independence Day to my fellow Americans! I want to give a _huge_ thank you hug to everyone who has stuck around thus far; only five chapters and we already scorched past 100 followers and 10,000 total views! It's stunning how much positive feedback I've received for this fic - I'm deeply humbled. And to clear something

up: I'm typing this story during my stay in the hospital, since I have loads of free time. Last time on A Patchwork Love, Hiccup finally proposed to Astrid, but what will her answer be? Also, if anyone caught the brief foreshadowing in Exorbitant Expectations, that detail will be elaborated on at the tail end of this chapter.

****Disclaimer: ****I pledge allegiance to the fact that I do not own How to Train Your Dragon, and to DreamWorks Animation, for which it stands, one company under Jeff, irreplaceable, with animation and entertainment for all.

* * *

<p>Chapter Five

"Astrid's Choice"

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"_What_?"

Gulping audibly, Hiccup repeated the condemning proposition, "A-Astrid...will you marry me?"

From where he kneeled on the ground, the boy stared timidly as Astrid's face contorted through a plethora of emotions in a brief stretch of time: unadulterated shock flashed by as her immediate reaction, nonplussed at the words she just heard her best friend utter; proceeded by contemplation flittering across her features, deliberating if he could actually be seriously asking her that question; realization when she ascertained that he did seriously ask that question, despite knowing full well her intention of staying chaste as a shieldmaiden, to protect and defend Berk with honor; and finally resentment when the two reasons for him asking that meant he either disregarded everything she put forth, and held dear, in life to sustain her class and title, or all this secrecy and strange behavior led to this - a distasteful gag being pulled on her.

A searing fire sparked within her icy irises and ignited her bones when Astrid unstrapped her battle-axe, pointing it threateningly at the gangly boy on bent knee in front of her. Nobody made a fool out of Astrid Hofferson, not even her best friend; attempting the feat resulted in broken bones and whimpers of never repeating it again.

"Is this some kind of...of sick joke?! A-A set-up to make me look stupid?!" the blonde tempest seethed, her tone fluctuating to a shrill shriek by the end of her diatribe, "Very funny! I'm sure you all had a good laugh. Where are the others? Hiding in the bushes I presume?"

"Wha-? No! No, no, no, I'm serious, Astrid! Honestly!" Hiccup babbled hurriedly as he scrambled to his feet out of the asinine kneel, "Look, I made this for you!" His hand dove in and out of his inner fur vest pocket, producing the tiny box in the bat of an eyelash and thumbing it open to reveal her oath band, "I know how much you adore Stormfly, so I used the scales she shed..."

Astrid's eyes widened as she gawked silently at the ring nestled

within the woolen viridian fabric of the box: an aquamarine stone rested on a thin metal band that shone brighter than iron, with azure dragon scale shards wrapping around the exterior circlet. On the inside of the band, the girl could discern some rune etchings, but from that distance she could neither read what they said, nor could she be bothered to find out.

She would have truly considered the ring a work of art, and praised Hiccup's fine craftsmanship of something so delicate, if her blood didn't boil with ire and her thoughts didn't sizzle with animosity for the dragon-obsessed blockhead. How could he dare to dream of forcing Astrid to bind herself - to tether herself - to him, when she discussed with him just a moon ago concerning her remaining pure to sustain her claim as shieldmaiden and becoming a perfect replica of her idol, Brynhild, from the ancient eddas.

During that quiet talk, she confessed to Hiccup her fears of being sold off by her parents to some wealthy foreign merchant, a strange man with a shadowed face, because her family already struggled financially and they would need the extra money eventually. Astrid clung to her unleashed freedom more possessively than her mother's old battle-axe, and growing up out of childhood into an adult could ultimately strip her of that if her best efforts failed her. Once a shieldmaiden married and became deflowered by her new husband, he would cast aside the kransen, because she would no longer be a maiden, and therefore sacrificed her title of shieldmaiden for something less impressive or noble - housewife.

She became repulsed at the thought of being a housewife, no matter if she carried the keys to the house; her fantastic endeavors lie beyond the overhanging eaves of a looming doorstep. Narrowing her eyelids, Astrid's gaze cut sharply to Hiccup's desperately searching face, who found himself on an imaginary fence between a rock and a hard place about what else to say to convince and evoke a "yes" from the girl.

"Hiccup," the blonde warrior growled, advancing slowly on her quarry with her axe raised before her, "What made you think for even a second that I would want to tie myself down with marriage?!" Astrid licked her lips and finished, "Did you forget everything that I said about what I felt about marriage?!"

At a loss for words to defend his motives, Hiccup set his tongue loose to wreak havoc on his friendship without supervising where it would take him, "I-I-I thought that...y-you know, you're the only...uh, a-and it seemed like the best option a-at the time-"

"Wait! Hold it right there, mister," Astrid interrupted his inane prattling, whirling her weapon lengthwise in her hand by utilizing the handle as a wooden axis, "Best option? For what? And don't lie to me - I'll know if you do." Her final statement came out as a rumbling warning, the pitch of her voice dropping considerably low like a metal anchor sinking to the depths of the foaming seas.

"I-It's my dad!" Hiccup implored to the girl, gesturing with a wide arm in the direction of the village and, more importantly, Chief Stoick. The flailing boy simply wished Astrid could understand the horrible dilemma his father trapped him in with this marriage

nonsense. "Either I become engaged by my seventeenth name-day," he flung one hand to the side, palm up, prior to flinging the other to match as he concluded, "Or he will pick for me! It's all part of my dad's insane idea to-"

"_So_..." the flaxen-haired girl cut him off again, stretching the long vowel until Hiccup mumbled into silence, clasping his hands anxiously, "It's your dad who wants you to marry..." A mop of auburn hair flopped vertically from the teenager's vigorously adamant nod, relieved that she showed signs of comprehending. "...And not you?" she completed her question, receiving a curt wag of Hiccup's head, his curtain of auburn bangs flapping onto either side of his throbbing temples.

"No, Astrid, believe you me when I say that I had no choice," Hiccup denied ardently, attempting to relieve the pressure building in the air around them, but since Hiccup became notorious for being a screw-up before becoming famous for riding a dragon, his words did what one would expect from him - screwed everything up.

Recognition combusted within Astrid's prime intelligence, the exploding dragon egg of her perceived understanding in her mind, and her voice dripped with venom as she bit, "Which means I'm merely an obligation, aren't I?!"

"Whoa!" the stunned boy tried to interject over the increasing volume of Astrid's accusations, however Hiccup fell short in his fruitless endeavors to be heard when she simply roared louder, "Wait! What are you-!"

"A bullet point on your list of things to get over with!"

"W-What-?! I never said-"

"Yes, because-!"

"NO! I would never say-!" the scrawny boy gainsaid vehemently, seeing their argument shaping into an infinitely cyclic dance, skirting around the real issues with the pointless banter.

"YES, HICCUP! Because you _just_ did!" she yelled pointedly, before ferociously burying her axe deep into the ground, blade first. Crossing her arms, she began speaking in a demeaning mimicry of Hiccup's nasally pitch, "No, Astrid, believe you me when I say that I had no choice." She wrote an invisible period in her imitation by drilling a death glare into him under which he withered.

"Astrid, I didn't mean it that way..." Hiccup struggled to recover any credibility left of his person, stretching out an earnest hand to the blonde, palm up and fingers spread wide. However, he didn't aid his cause of salvaging his image when he superfluously mumbled, "...And I don't sound like that."

"Do you even hear yourself when you talk?!"

Astrid promptly ignored the open gesture to take his hand in hers, instead turning in place to face away from him, hugging her folded arms closer to her bosom. She reverted to what she did best before the end of the dragon wars, in a time when she still treated the boy behind her with disdain - she shut people out; she shut _him_

out.

"It doesn't matter how you meant it, Hiccup," her voice shook unwillingly in the stillness of the cove, "Despite how I feel about marriage, the fact is you don't want to marry me for _me_."

Hiccup could have sworn his jaw hit the earth and that all of the gods in Olympus sat flabbergasted at what Astrid accused of him.

"That's not true!" the boy retaliated to the back of Astrid's head and the golden braid that limply hung there, retracting his hand and stepping forward cautiously until he stood a couple of paces behind her, "That's not true at all! Of course I want to marry you for you! You're the _only_ one I want! You have no idea how amazing you are!"

Disregarding his final statement, which seemed more sincere than he let on, Astrid spun on her heel to look Hiccup squarely, but dubiously, in his emerald eyes, "Then why mention your dad? Why tell me that he's forcing you to get married?"

"Because," he breathed out slowly, harnessing his respirations and shutting his eyes, and restarted, "Because I wanted you to understand the yak shit that my father has put me in about getting engaged." His prickling eyes snapped open as he quelled the welling and controlled his tear ducts, shouting hopelessly, "I'm damned if I do, and I'm damned if I don't!"

Reading the faint flickers of emotion on his freckled face, Astrid studied him through squinted eyelids, and then rested her hands on her hips as she repudiated solemnly, "No, Hiccup. I don't believe that's the reason why you dragged your dad into this."

Disbelief blossomed over his features as Hiccup's lower jaw hung ajar, and he gesticulated aimlessly while sputtering indignantly, "Astrid, my dad is the _chief_ reason this is happening-!"

"No. No, you're using him as an _excuse_," declared the girl wisely, ignoring his ill-timed pun and analyzing the scenario more astutely than Hiccup would have liked, "A Thors-damned _excuse_ so that I wouldn't blame you for asking for my hand, because you know I have every intention of never marrying!"

Hiccup gaped at Astrid like a deer in a torch's light, afraid to distance himself further from fault, because her assumptions all happened to be correct: he _did_ remember she wanted nothing to do with marriage and he _did_ hope she wouldn't be pissed with him if he threw his father under the ship - so to speak - and informed her this all originated from him.

"All right, yes, I do recall your stance and persistence to stay a maiden," admitted the russet-haired teenager candidly, praying to Freya that maybe disclosing some confessions would be able to bring her around, "But, _please_, if you would just...just hear me out-"

"Why?!" the infuriated girl scoffed heatedly, her patience with the boy on its last tenuous strings as she jabbed a finger into the sinews of his chest, "Why should I listen to you if you couldn't care

less about what is most important to me? You completely disregarded our friendship when you thought up the brilliant idea of proposing to me, and only thought of yourself and your own crap without pausing to think if I even wanted this!"

Out of breath from yelling, Astrid pulled her hand down and trudged over to her still-buried battle-axe in the soil, reclaiming and reslinging her weapon with practiced ease.

The heinous slurs which made Hiccup out to be a selfish ass struck a nerve in him, waking the snake that slumbered within his worst memories. His temper flared as the hissing egged him on, a malignant cheering when he renounced her slander, "I have always put you first, as both my friend and more! Don't stand there and spit in my face that I disregarded our friendship, because it was a critical factor in my decision! I have only ever wanted the best for you, Astrid, so don't you dare tell me I couldn't care less about you...because I could have just as easily went and presented your parents a chest full of gold for your hand!"

Astrid froze in replacing her axe on her shoulder blades - dumbfounded that Hiccup would even consider going behind her back to purchase her from her parents. Sustaining a grip on her axe and slowly turning towards Hiccup again, Astrid snarled, hinting at possibly marring the scoundrel before her.

"You wouldn't dare."

"I could. I could do it right now!"

Of course Hiccup wouldn't actually do it, but Astrid didn't have to know that. She simply needed to acknowledge that he thought of her first by asking for her hand from Astrid herself and not her parents - that he valued her freedom to accept or reject his proposal over his desperation to find a wife. He put her best interests ahead of his, and that crucial point became the driving force behind why he posed the threat to approach her parents: to remind her he could have done it that way but chose not to. Hiccup wanted her to marry him with her volition, and only if she reciprocated his romantic feelings. Striking a deal with the girl's parents without Astrid's input - the traditional way to arrange a marriage - just felt wrong to him; in any case, he needed to make a show of it until she apologized.

With a shrug of his bony shoulders, the boy plodded away in the direction of where the dragons disappeared, cupping his mouth and shouting at the top of his lungs, "TOOTHLE-!"

In the span of a heartbeat, Hiccup heard a distinct whirling pierce the air behind him, like that of a projectile revolving in midair with a trajectory aimed for him. His deductions became verified when a soft thud resounded in close proximity to his mismatched feet; he swung around to behold Astrid's prized weapon with the blade dug even deeper into the muddy dirt. His gaze darted from the axe to its owner, who stood with her legs spread apart and right foot taking point, heaving mighty breaths and causing her breasts to swell and fall provocatively - Hiccup knew better than to immaturely think about her breasts right then, or to think her labored breathing resulted from exertion, or to think that Astrid hurling her axe at his feet could be an attack.

"Don't...even think...about it," Astrid scowled, her corrosive words spoken between inhales as she flexed her fingers, intermittent pops crackling the charged atmosphere like lightning. She strode up briskly and reacquired her weapon, shoving her fiery face into Hiccup's and whispering harshly, "You think you can waltz up to my papa and just buy me with your money; just...just bribe my parents with your wealth?!"

She ended up shouting the last few words from the shortened distance between them, making Hiccups' ears smart and ring as he stumbled back. The thought of being bought to become a powerless, common housewife, like a cow being traded only for its ability to supply milk, enraged Astrid and reinforced her resolve. Hiccup, though, felt foolishly compelled to make her realize just how much influence he retained over the matter, the vengeful serpent in his ear feeding him false impressions and dark thoughts.

"Why not, Astrid? What advantage would they have in saying no?" Hiccup spread his arms wide, almost as if he meant to come and embrace her, but instead the spiteful viper in his mind slithered with anger at Astrid's refusal to listen - he needed to prove his worth to her. "Like you said, I have plenty of money for the bride-price! For both the mundr and the morgengifu...ten times over!" He laughed derisively and plowed on with gusto, "I am a hero! I saved the village! Not to mention I am the son of Stoick the Vast; the son of the chief!"

This peacock that stood with his feathers fanned out in a stilted fashion, maliciously grinning from ear to ear - this didn't look like Hiccup; this couldn't be Hiccup. Hiccup, the first of the dragon riders. Hiccup, the hero who slayed the Red Death. Hiccup, her best friend. Someone else now posed there, strutting around as a contemptible charade of Hiccup Haddock. To see her friend suddenly consumed by himself: his valiant deeds; his storehouse of riches; and his title, a birthright he didn't even want and here he stood, parading it around in front of her like he deserved the status - it all made Astrid sick to her stomach.

Wrinkling her nose in disgust, she closed the space separating them again, sneering defiantly and muttering on the contrary, "Either way, my parents would reject you and send you packing before you even got the words out of your mouth."

The agitated boy narrowed his eyes and murmured just as fiercely, "And how would you know that?"

"Because," the blonde paced a half-step backwards and scathingly elaborated with a snigger, "You're you, Hiccup, and they still despise Hiccup the Useless. Chief's son or not."

That proclamation ripped into him like a dagger stabbing through Hiccup's scarred heart, rehashing old memories from before he met Toothless that he laid to rest many moons ago. The teenager knew the unlikelihood of getting every single villager in Berk to approve of him, but he at least figured that everyone left his old and shameful moniker behind - apparently he turned out to be wrong. Hiccup's furious attitude melted away into an abandoned feeling of despair, staring at Astrid mortified that she would resurrect his past branded label, one that haunted his nightmares for so many years -

Useless.

Crestfallen, he twisted away quickly, idly interlacing and unwinding his fingers in meditation from the blow, having no desire to allow Astrid to see how much her comments affected him. Suddenly, in his reflective thought processes, he acknowledged not that someone deemed to use his past as a useless Viking against him, but that _Astrid_ became the one to do so. Friends did not do that to their friends. Hiccup reached his breaking point; the last straw of discreet ire with his supposed "friend". His lips contorted into a snarl, baring his teeth and grinding them together with a strained jaw. He clenched his fists when they started to shake violently, and he rounded on the expectant girl standing in the waning beams of the evening light.

"You..." he grumbled bitterly, before raising his voice and yelling, "You have no idea how much torture I went through as Hiccup the _Useless_! All those years growing up as a weakling - and with _Snotlout_ for a cousin! He put me through the ringer every day, flanked by the twins, his...his _sycophants_, and they beat me until I dragged myself home bruised and bleeding and _broken_!"

Astrid knit a brow and bit her lower lip tentatively, thumbing her axe, not quite sure of what can of worms she just opened - and if she could handle the consequences; but he barreled onward, screaming his heart out for years of bullying and neglect.

"And _you_!" roared Hiccup, "You just stood by the wayside and watched it all go down! The silent overseer of my punishments as those three kicked me and punched me and threw me...tossed me around like garbage! Trash to be swept away and forgotten! When all I wanted was to help the village - to kill a dragon and _impress_ you! But no, you couldn't give a rat's _ass_ about me! I knew you didn't approve of the belittlement and the harassment - I could see it in your eyes! And yet, you didn't have the guts, the _courage_, to stand up for me, like a decent person would have! Because you were scared that they would turn on you...because you were afraid you would become a social outcast like me!"

Inhaling loudly, he bellowed at the thoughtful girl.

"BECAUSE YOU ARE A COWARD!"

He never meant for his last slight to switch to the present tense, but in the heat of the moment, his tongue got carried away and Hiccup the village screw-up struck again; Astrid picked up on the tense leap instantaneously, eyelids sliding back further than usual from over her constricted pupils with a revived ire.

"Coward?!" she queried viciously, tightening her grasp on her axe menacingly, "I'm not a coward! Look, I know you had an extremely tough childhood, and I'm sorry. I've apologized for it so many times for how I acted - and you were the one who told me to stop! Because you said you forgave us, and that was more than I could ask for from you considering all the things I _didn't_ do for you during those years!"

She gasped for air, tears building up on her lower lids and glistening in the early moonlight, but when Hiccup parted his lips to interrupt, she bowled over him.

"But don't you dare call me a coward! Who was it who kept your secrets about both Toothless and the dragons' nest?! Who was it who went into the kill ring to save your sorry ass when the Nightmare starting attacking you?! Who was it who rounded up the others to help you in rescuing the village with nothing but blind hope?! Who is it who has been by your side since then, through thick and thin, helping you and supporting you?! It's me! ME!"

The cursed brine dribbled down her cheeks, and Astrid whipped away from Hiccup, sniffing loudly as she wiped the water away with a flustered wrist. Hiccup softened at the sight, and pangs of guilt began to rack his mind while the erroneous serpent slunk away into the recesses of his mind, snickering at the boy's plight. Suddenly, Astrid cupped her hands around her mouth and howled, calling for Stormfly from wherever she and Toothless wandered off to. Without turning around, she stated one final time, a barely audible whisper, "I am not a coward...and my answer is no."

"Astrid, wait-" Hiccup started with dismay, panicking from the visible change in Astrid's tone and carriage.

"I SAID NO, HICCUP!" shouted the girl while whirling around, flushed from her emotions pulling her in all sorts of directions.

The shadow of a Deadly Nadder cascaded over Astrid's form, and she hastily grabbed the saddle and flung herself onto her dragon's back, whispering incoherently into her ear, and with a commiserating croon, the pair took off into the darkening night sky. Hiccup could only watch in miserable despair as their silhouette blocked out a path of starlight in their voyage through the air, disappearing in the midst of the forest canopy.

Hiccup mentally berated himself as Toothless padded up next to him, shooting his boy a supplicating look with his emotive chartreuse orbs. The distraught teenager placed a gentle hand on his Night Fury and rhetorically asked him another damning question without looking away from where his crush vanished in the yawning darkness.

"_What have I done_"

â€ â€¢ â€ â€¢ â€

Astrid didn't immediately fly back home like Hiccup thought she did; or, rather, not the place he associated her home to be located. She decided to land in one of her old training areas from a time during the dragon wars, when laying one's head down to sleep carried the heavy potential of waking up with one's house burning down and all the memories lived in there going up in flames. The small spot of Valhalla in this remote part of the woods happened to be the same one in which she first caught sight of Hiccup passing through the forest, carrying a misshapened bundle which she later learned to be Toothless' leather tack.

The spacious clearing that Astrid now stood in the heart of shrouded itself from prying eyes with hanging moss and thick vines, surrounded by a perimeter of damaged and hewn trees. This place soothed her frazzled nerves and felt more like home than her actual lodging house did, her eyes sliding shut as her mind recalled, against her will, the faint yelling of her father and the distant sobbing of her

mother. She tuned out the difficult memories and struck up an offensive stance, battle-axe cocked back in readiness for a severely needed session of savage hacking at inanimate objects.

Stormfly tramped off to the side of the open circle and settled down in a patch of wild dragon nip, lethargy overtaking her with the thumping of Astrid's axe becoming her lullaby and dozing off from the intoxicating grass. The blonde regarded her Deadly Nadder with a loving smile when a snore erupted from the snoozing reptile to her far right.

The salty breeze from the ocean surf tickled the nape of Astrid's neck as beads of sweaty teardrops slid over her high cheekbones to soak into her damp tunic. The hoot of a nearby snowy owl did not faze the flaxen-crowned warrior when she raised her axe and threw it with all her strength at the thickest tree, imagining a charging raider in her mind's eye.

Whack!

The sound that punctured the silence around her satisfied her cravings of exhausting violence and tactical fighting as she jogged over and retrieved her weapon. Astrid always came out here in the woods for training, but she also practiced her axe tosses when she became overly emotional about something, whether in fury or in distress. The spot proved to be secluded, and only the notched plants and scratched boulders that filled the area witnessed her wretched crying and cursing tongue.

Whack!

Her face streamed with cleansing tears, but she didn't sob or whimper aloud, lest she alerted anyone listening to the psychological turmoil brewing inside of her. In her maelstrom of feelings she cycled through that night, her misery and handling of the situation brought her the most shame, which became her excuse to weep and swear within the solitude of the hushed forest. Of course, for some reason, she couldn't stop thinking about the dragon boy who currently caused all of her teenage angst and woe.

Hiccup Haddock.

Whack!

Picturing a smirking Hiccup leaning against the tree in front of her, casually tossing an apple into the air with a single hand, Astrid lined up her weapon's dual head with his burlesque head. The axe left her hand in a twirl and, even with her aim remaining true, she experienced no satisfaction or relief from splitting his dopey face down the middle.

Whack!

She stepped up to the embedded axe and yanked it out, before going into a frenzy without warning and hacking away at the bark, where the imaginary boy still grinned tauntingly at her.

Whack!

Whack!

Whack!

She released a startling gurgle of a cry, which morphed into a scream and climaxed into a high-pitched shriek of her straining windpipe, the cacophany bellowed into the open air disturbing a flock of nesting birds - but also failing to disperse the taut ropes strangling her inner being. Feeling worse, she rubbed at her sweaty brow, snatching back her axe from the trunk and sending it spinning into another defenseless tree on the other side of the ecliptic clearing.

Whack!

Why - _how_ - did this _hiccup_ have to put her through such agony? She didn't know _before_ this how she felt about Hiccup, except that he developed into a great friend and he never failed to put a smile on her face; she could say that they definitely worked well together as a team. Now, she couldn't place a finger on one feeling she perceived because of him, because her heart and mind exploded with a multitude of feelings for the lanky imbecile. Astrid mentally resorted to sorting out her emotions individually, relishing the positive ones and relinquishing the negative ones - all in the name of personal complacency.

Whack!

Enmity towards the bumbling boy dominated the majority of her stewing mind, and her antipathy of being married to _anyone_ churned her insides into an incarnated delirium. More significantly than that, the confusing notion that _Hiccup_ asked for her hand flipped their entire relationship on its head - did he really harbor those types of feelings for her? Astrid's friendship with the auburn-haired boy developed into one of the few things in her life that she thought she could count on always being there, no matter what transpired; could the two of them still be friends after that evening's disaster? Astrid acknowledged, though, that her constant frustration for what Hiccup tried to pull earlier would become unhealthy after a while, so with a wild chuck of her battle-axe, she sank it into another wooden enemy and released the fuming tension in her lithe body.

Whack!

Despair tormented the confines of her conscience, because now the realization bowled into her at full force that she might be married off by her parents; she turned of age for that displeasure long ago. It honestly frightened Astrid to no end, since she always associated the oath bands of marriage with imaginary iron shackles - to become a social slave to her new husband and have her freedom of choice forcibly stripped from her. She would rather die in a rank prison cell than cast away her pride and liberty willingly. However, despite her adamant position on being betrothed, she recognized that this despair would ultimately destroy her in the long run; so, she set it free.

Whack!

Particularly in the privacy of her forest clearing, loneliness gnawed

on her burdened bones, leaving behind teeth marks of affliction and bitterness in its wake. For most of her life, bolstered by growing up as an only child, Astrid adhered to the once comforting notion of eventually living by herself and striking out on her own; as she matured, she came to the understanding that the loneliness which accompanied shutting the world out meant a tumultuous life of hardships with no one to turn to for support. Hiccup made her want to open up - mostly to him - and although she despised the insufferable boy right then, she could concede the horrible consequences of pushing everyone away - and discarded the remnants of her self-imposed confinement.

Whack!

The nominal feeling she chose not to acknowledge pecked away at her intellect, in spite of her better judgment, because she couldn't even identify and assign a proper name to the blasted notion. The tingling sensation deep within her core, the coiling of her guts into unnatural knots, and the jolt of adrenaline that quickened her heart rate whenever she simply _touched_ Hiccup: everything amassed together into a cluster of enigmatic incidences which only occurred around the knucklehead - but that didn't mean they felt altogether terrible. Sometimes, Astrid would admit, the skin-on-skin contact with him kindled a slight buzz within her that physically felt nice. What could she call it though?

Whack!

Wrenching her axe out of the chiseled bark, Astrid halted abruptly by the gnarled tree and observed herself running her thumb along the blade's dulled edge thoughtfully. With all her worst feelings abandoned and incapable of meddling with the pull strings of her temperament, one conclusion blindsided her with such magnitude that her breath hitched in her throat. Without her anger, her fear, and her solitude, it left her with nothing - just an empty vacuum of a void where her heart should be - and the idea that destructive emotions made up her whole incurred a deplorable resentment inside of her.

A tear fell on the glistening iron of her weapon's blade, and staring at the minuscule drop of depression rent her soul apart; what happened to the old Astrid Hofferson? Where did the fearless blonde fighter take a wrong turn on her path to becoming the best? Sure, the Vikings of Berk didn't slaughter dragons anymore, but that shouldn't keep her from pursuing a life of greatness and superiority! Her hands quaked slightly from the twister spinning in her conscience, a whirlwind of degrading thoughts and barking motivations, the most prominent of which she swore sounded like they spoke in her papa's disappointed voice:

_ 'Yer_ _bett'ae than this! '_

_ 'What's th'ae matt'ae with ye?! '_

_ 'Stop actin' so weak! '_

_ 'Suck it up! '_

Astrid slit her cold eyes and clenched her jaw, unsteadily wiping the remainder of the wetness and dirt smudges off her face. Invigorated

with purpose, she headed over to her dragon and awakened her from her peaceful repose, attaching her abused battle-axe to the posterior portion of the leather tack. Stormfly blinked intently with a single eye trained on her rider while the girl climbed into the custom saddle, rubbing the dragon's crown of spikes apologetically and appreciatively.

"You think you have one more flight in you, girl?" Astrid whispered with renewed intensity to Stormfly, earning a sleepy chirp of assent from the Nadder in reply, "Then let's go home."

On that command, Stormfly leapt into the air as the two joined the nighttime clouds in the predawn sky, gliding off towards the twinkling of the fires that pervaded the sleeping village.

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The brutish Viking of a man crossed his stocky arms and stood erect in the darkness of his front doorstep, watching discreetly as Hiccup shuffled by with his faithful Night Fury in tow. The dejected boy, head hung low and shuffling morosely, passed by with no cognizance of the nefarious man spying on him; the dragon, on the other hand, dug an unfriendly and penetrating gaze into him, almost as if he could see what the man's thoughts consisted of.

Once the scarlet prosthetic fin of the disabled Night Fury disappeared up the hill and into the chief's house, the man stepped back from under the door frame and closed the door roughly. He scrutinized the furnishings of his sturdy house: from the planks of the floorboards to the beams of the rafters, and from the flickering flames in the central hearth to the dancing shadows they cast around the main room. A good, strong lodging for a good, strong family; just like it required care and attention to maintain a clean and tidy house, likewise did it take care and attention to raise a traditional and respectful family.

The only thing that broke the strict rules of tradition under the hulking man's roof existed in the form of his son's Monstrous Nightmare, who slept peacefully in a tight doughnut in the corner of the room. How his son got the overgrown lizard into their house went beyond his comprehension, but he allowed it on the conditions that the dragon only slept inside during the winter moons and that he didn't ignite his body into a living torch while confined within the wooden walls. The last time that happened ensued three straight weeks of laborious repairs, which included replacing their home's burnt wooden furniture and scorched interior.

The man rubbed a passive hand over his boxed beard, a brunet mask that, interspersed with the occasional gray hair, covered the lower half of his lined face. His bi-horned helmet adorned the top of his square head, partly concealing his brunet locks which draped below his earlobes; dark crops of hair concealed his short sideburns until they merged into the scratchy plains of his stubbled whiskers. His topaz eyes roved about in their sockets, taking in the various comforts scattered around the room: the yak-fur rug stretched out beside the hearth; the last of the bread from supper sitting on the table; and his giant armchair, which he positioned in front of the glowing fire during chilly nights like these.

He trudged across the empty space and plopped down into his worn

chair, his five feet and ten inch, two hundred pound frame coaxing a groan out of the stuffed armchair. His massive back faced the front entrance as he hunched over, elbows on his knees with his hands clasped together, staring intently into the licking tongues of heat and ruminating on a certain dragon rider. He held an indelible revulsion for the weakling son of the chief, scoffing whenever a passing villager so much as hailed him a cheerful greeting in the morning, and scowling at any blessings he overheard being given to the "hero".

After his lucky killing of the Red Death, the whole cursed town became enamored with the teenager, everyone but a sensible few hoodwinked by Loki himself, singing his praises and recounting his glorious heroics. The trickster god could not have picked a worse time to have the townspeople exalt the once useless heir, striking right when he planned to approach Chief Stoick about a critical matter involving Hiccup and the chieftainship. Nonetheless, the brute learned that all good things come to those who wait, and patiently he watched from the sidelines, because it would only be a matter of time before the clumsy loon of an heir reverted back to his old habits and screwed up again.

Unfortunately for the biding man, Hiccup kept his nose clean and played his cards well for the greater part of the past year, rubbing the aggravated man the wrong way with his humble character. He reminded himself that the more the villagers celebrated the boy and raised him up on his precarious pedestal, the harder he would hit the ground when he finally messed up, disappointing all of Berk and, most importantly, Stoick.

A creaking from the door opening behind him dissolved the placid atmosphere inside, but the man didn't react when a familiar voice addressed him nervously.

"Father?"

"Yes, son?" the large man replied with chagrin from being interrupted of his meditative thoughts concerning the problem at hand - the Haddock boy.

His usually oblivious son seemed to realize he irked his father out of some major contemplation, because he wavered with indecision at continuing on to his request; his hesitation further agitated the man, already tired of his child's bothersome presence.

"Out with it, boy!" barked the older Viking crossly, causing the youth to jump where he stood just inside the entryway, door still ajar and allowing cold air to seep into the warm bubble of the house's interior.

"C-Can I go out for one more flight?" the large boy finally stammered out, inwardly kicking himself for the inadvertent stutter in his speech.

"Why?"

"A warrior needs to stretch out his wings-"

"No. It's late. Th'ae sun already set an 'our ago," came the harried answer from the oversized chair.

"_Please_, Pop? I swear I won't be gone long," the son promised his disgruntled father, hoping the last statement would appease him; with his father, the boy quickly learned at a young age that it became better to ask permission than to beg for forgiveness after the fact. The man appeared to have ignored his son, but after a few seconds of consideration, he afforded him a response.

"All right, ye 'ave one 'our, son," sighed his father, pinching the bridge of his nose and scrunching his eyes, "But ye make sure ye 'ave yer ass back in 'ere t'ae do yer nightly chures befor' bed."

"Thank you, Father!" the stout teenager thanked him enthusiastically, prior to a ruckus of thumping footsteps moving behind the man, from his left to his right, as the child awakened his dragon. Another freezing draft filtered its way into the lodging and sent involuntary shivers up the man's spine, and he bristled at his son's incompetence.

"An' 'urry it up, boy! Yer lettin' all the warm air out!" the fuming man snapped impatiently, wishing for some peace and quiet that he could never seem to get around there anymore.

"Sorry, Father. It won't happen again," stated the younger Viking with obsequious sincerity, sending a rushed prayer up to Odin for guidance in remembering to shut the door in the future.

"Yer damn right it won't 'appen again," his austere father retorted brusquely as the boy and the Nightmare inched towards the exit - and escape. "It'll be a lashin' th'ae next time ye do."

"Yes sir," his anxious son gulped audibly and acknowledged his father's threat of discipline, "I understand." With a loud squeaking of the floorboards and a slam of the front door, the boy and his dragon fled outside into the chilly weather - to create trouble more so than fly around, the man mused.

The brute's mind strayed off in thought and reflected on his crude plans for when the Haddock child eventually tripped over his own feet - _foot_ he chuckled darkly - and brought shame to his household name like he used to. The initiation of his grand design to seize political control of Berk depended on the chief's son taking a false step and, ergo, leaving the door wide open for him to coerce his way through - although, not him directly. He possessed, on good faith, a puppet of whom he could pull the strings in whichever fashion he pleased and yet remain out of the limelight from the Viking populace.

He cackled quietly, weaving his sausage fingers into a fleshy plait in his intense concentration of sifting through the various social and economic maneuvers he plotted out. The buffoons of the town and the council wouldn't register what hit them until it became too late to reverse! The fate of the island would be in his hands, and he would rule over his subjects with an iron fist!

This serene contriving progressed for well past an hour, with the man's son reentering the house and setting immediately to work on his chores. With his father in the main room, shirking his responsibilities became an impossibility, and after sparing a lingering peek at his father's odd behavior, dove into his nighttime

housework.

The son cleared away the table and swept the dust and dirt coating the floor out the back door; he fed his lazy dragon a late night snack of fresh fish from the barrel outside and set his fathers' boots on the doorstep to air out. Finally, he gathered his meager number of clothing in a woven basket and set it downstairs to be washed the next morning with the rest of the laundry.

The pair, man and boy, spoke not one word to each other, the man lost within the recesses of his scheming mind and the boy much too busy flying through his work so he could retire to bed. Once he did put the last of his tunics into the overflowing basket, the youth traipsed to the staircase and made to ascend the narrow climb. Thinking to assuage the nearly palpable tension between he and his father stretching from earlier, the boy paused with one foot on the first step and turned his shifting gaze to the man in the chair.

"I finished with my chores," he supplied wearily, prepared to welcome the soft wool blanket which stretched over his wooden bed, "I'm heading to bed now."

His father didn't remove his eyes from zoning into the spirited flames as he affirmed, "Good. See t'ae it ye wake up all th'ae earli'ae t'aemorrow t'ae wash that laundry."

"I will," chorused the large teenager obediently, turning to ascend the stairs, but twisted back and murmured to his father from across the large expanse that divided the two men like a vast canyon, "Good night, Father."

The man in his armchair pulled out of his pensive reverie when his misted eyes cleared and he looked to his son. His bumbling son didn't know it just yet, but once he brought his devious schemes to fruition, the boy would learn of his vital role in his father's master plan; he unveiled his teeth in a smirk that shined with mischief.

"Good night, Snotlout."

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><p>AN: **I'm sorry! I know some people in the reviews wanted Astrid to say yes, but she had absolutely no reason to. I hope I portrayed the argument adequately and neither Hiccup nor Astrid seemed out of character. Next chapter will bring the gang back together, but a certain shieldmaiden won't be so cordial with a certain heir - unlike their dragons. Please review and tell me what you thought about the chapter, because reading what my readers have to say is seriously the best part about uploading this story to the web. Thank you! Diskonnekt out.

6. Chapter Six

**A/N: **Thank you for your reviews and critiques; hence, there are a couple of things I would like to clarify from last chapter. First, I'm treating Riders/Defenders of Berk as canon, and we see a gloating

side of Hiccup during Thawfest. He only feigned the threat to approach her parents to argue that he did put Astrid and her desires first before his. I added in a paragraph making this critical difference more clear - he never intended to ask her parents. Second, this is fan fiction, which means it will have things that aren't real (like dragons?). Historically speaking, I'm well aware that shieldmaidens never truly existed and that all Viking women were expected to marry, but for the purpose of this story, it is integral to the plot that they lived and never wedded. I probably should have addressed these concerns before now, but hopefully this serves as an acceptable explanation.

****Disclaimer:** **It totally slipped my mind to put this here when I first uploaded the chapter, and since no wailing sirens or barking officers showed up at my door, I've deduced just how frivolous these disclaimers really are.

* * *

<p>Chapter Six

"The Way of All Scales"

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Hiccup would have given anything to pass off teaching at the Academy the morning after Snoggletog, but that entailed approaching Astrid about taking over for the day, and that charming notion wrought more dread in him than trying to persevere through a lesson. Therefore, the headmaster chose the lesser of two evils and made an appearance at the arena, taking care to arrive earlier than the other riders to discourage any uncomfortable incidences with a certain shieldmaiden. Today would be awkward enough without bringing up yesterday's failed proposal in the presence of the rest of the gang - principally Snotlout.

If his cousin caught so much as an inkling of the terrible debacle from the night prior, Hiccup would never hear the end of it.

Following a brief night of no sleep, apprehension consumed Hiccup, a woolen blanket smothering him with too much muggy heat and not enough breathable air, and the boy found it difficult to keep himself from hyperventilating again. His lungs seemed to be the first organs to go haywire whenever he experienced an anxiety attack, the constricting of his trachea not helping the cause of regulating his shuddering inhales and exhales. Toothless remained dutifully by his boy's side whenever the exerting occurrences happened, and consoled him with a sympathetic warble as if to say, 'Everything is all right. Just breathe.'

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

The gasping teenager would cycle through the simplistic directions in his mind repetitively, willing his stubborn lungs to obey, until finally his windpipe stayed true to its name and dilated back to normal. The air vacuumed into his hungry chest in the same manner one would gulp for oxygen when breaking the surface of water, after

holding one's breath underwater for much too long. Although refreshing once under control, the process by which Hiccup lost his ability to breathe properly could not be any less welcome, and he mentally cursed Loki for plaguing him with the alarming episodes.

Upon entering the renovated ring, Hiccup crossed the open space to the titanic double doors which guarded Hookfang's pen, and pulled down the lever to unlock the gateway. He dissolved into the darkness for an extended minute before returning outside, dragging his trusted blackboard out into the early rays of dawn, heavenly javelins of light being jammed through the clouds and into Midgard by Odin himself. Shutting the doors once more, he situated the board directly in front of the closed pen, grabbing a spare cloth from one of the supply chests and soaking it in the water trough to wipe the board's surface clean of its old chalk.

Rounding around the circumference of the arena, Hiccup arduously collected empty boxes and barrels and positioned them one by one on either side of the blackboard, divided unevenly two to three. The hodgepodge of containers certainly didn't look aesthetically pleasing, but they would serve their purpose as makeshift podiums well enough, the boy mused. He brushed off his hands lightly before flanking them on his hips, nodding to himself confidently in his inspection of the incongruous setup, satisfied with his painstaking endeavors.

The cardinal plan for that morning would be a relaxed lesson in the form of a pop quiz. No training exercise to plot out carefully and oversee to; no pressing reason to fly their dragons for an exam that required intelligence over experience; and hopefully no significant destruction of property, at least on the twins' part. No, this would be an enjoyable day full of little known trivia and entertaining answers to baffling questions; and, of course, Hiccup selected himself as moderator of the entire affair. He preferred to not entangle himself in the emulous nature of the rest of the group, being a peacekeeper by nature and in practice more so than a combative warrior - not that they heeded him, anyway.

The other teenagers trickled in one after another, some yawning and clawing at heavy eyelids and some - one - beaming and talking animatedly. The dichotomy between the night owls and the early birds could not be any less clandestine - Snotlout and the twins had difficulty not collapsing to the ground from sleep deprivation, while Fishlegs' lively carriage brought a skewed division to their levels of alertness.

Surveying the lethargic environment, Hiccup wiped his sweaty palms on his fur vest and breathed out tiredly, his cheeks rouge and worry lines creasing his freckled face. The dryness of his mouth scratched his throat and tickled his uvula, but even when he licked his lips repeatedly from worry, the chapped coating cracked with flecks of warm blood from the aridity of the freezing weather. With all his focus concentrated on not panicking about Astrid before she even arrived, he didn't realize that another boy kept a keen eye on the lanky headmaster.

"Are you all right, Hiccup?" a concerned Fishlegs asked his distressed friend, walking up to him without hiding the stitch in his brow.

"What? Who, me? I'm great!" sang the auburn-haired boy with false cheer, his casual façade flimsy at best.

"You sure? It looks like you may be coming down with something..."

Hiccup would have appreciated the regard his friend delegated to his welfare, but this morning could not be a worse time to express his worry - considering what transpired the previous evening with Astrid, no less. He pasted a brave smile for the blond and feigned ignorance to his own affliction.

"Seriously, I'm fine," Hiccup waved a flippant hand as he tried to assuage the other boy, and at Fishlegs' incredulous look, offered an unconvincing rejoinder to lighten the mood, "I'm...I'm as right as rain!"

"Well, if you need to talk, being a good listener is on my repertoire," coaxed the blond, in hopes of encouraging a less erroneous answer. Knowing that he did not know what looked to be a great mental burden on his friend's mind bothered Fishlegs to no end, like an irritating itch on the middle of his back that cropped up barely out of reach of his stubby arms to scratch. The urge to claw at this psychological itch drove the larger teenager insane - being a boy composed of facts and answers, it chagrined him when he didn't have a suitable answer to sooth his curiosity.

"Honestly, Fishlegs, I'm fine."

"If you say so."

Hiccup faked a genial laugh, praying that the other boy would accept his evasive fibbing and leave him alone. Although retaining a skeptical expression, Fishlegs dropped the issue with a shrug and returned to attending to a snoozing Meatlug, scratching her at the base of her ears; the thinner boy allowed a relieved sigh to escape him.

Surveying the enclosure and counting heads, the boy paused at recognizing Astrid's peculiar absence; he would usually fly Toothless over to her house to see if something happened, but his attitude towards the fair maiden became mixed as of yesterday. Everything became sticky enough without encountering her parents - he shuddered at the image of running into them.

To Hiccup's proceeding bewilderment, Astrid failed to materialize under the iron gate of the entrance until everyone else already assembled inside for nearly half an hour. Astrid trudged into the enclosure lacking the usual spring in her step, stomping instead with conviction and dismissing her bloodshot eyes as the result of training through the night.

"Are you sure you weren't crying?" Snotlout heckled, sidling up next to her and draping an arm over her spaulders, "Because if you need a shoulder to cry on, mine is all yours, babe."

At his presumptuous invitation, a battle cry tore from Astrid's throat, grasping Snotlout by the wrist that brushed her armor and bending forward with her body. Yanking downward with unprecedented

strength, she overpowered and up-ended the brunet by slamming him onto his back, proving irrefutably with one swift motion of her muscled body her superiority over Snotlout. Ruff and Tuff whooped with exhilaration at the - in their words - _awesome_ takedown, and Fishlegs couldn't help the upward curve of his lips as he sniggered at his bitter rival's dilemma.

The prone boy wheezed loudly from the air getting knocked out of him as the blonde victor, tucking her swinging fringe behind her left ear and standing over him at such an angle that each appeared upside-down to the other.

"Don't touch me," Astrid spelled out slowly, reveling in the hesitant fear in the boy's turquoise eyes, "Or next time, you'll lose something more precious than your dignity."

Hiccup, Fishlegs, and Tuffnut all crossed their thighs purposefully, comprehending what Snotlout might lose the next time he ventured onto Astrid's ruthless side. Having nothing to safeguard, Ruff simply leered at the brunet, eyes cutting away to glance at his family jewels every few seconds in contemplation, before sneaking a peek at Hiccup's crotch and smirking. The russet-haired boy saw and tightened his folded legs protectively.

Snotlout wet his dry lips, nodding his head vigorously in acquiescence to her blunt command, having no desire to warrant further punishment from the incensed valkyrie. As Astrid whipped away from him, the demeaned teenager stared unmoving into the brightening sky and moaned weakly.

"Ow..."

Straddling his throne of boxes as if he sat astride Belch's long neck, Tuffnut hollered across the arena to the humiliated brunet, who remained motionless on his stony bed.

"Hey, Lout, it must really suck to be beaten up by a girl!"

"Wouldn't you know!" hissed Snotlout impetuously, making an offhand gesture in Ruff's direction.

Tuff's callous taunt rubbed salt on the wound of Snotlout's inflated pride, and upon seeing the poignant scowl on the other boy's face, the blond hooted with uncolored derision, evoking a rude hand gesture from Snotlout in response. The male Thorston rocked dangerously on his tower, and didn't register the cracking of knuckles coming from his sister who sat by him.

"What, you mean like _this_?" Ruffnut inquired with malevolent intent.

She didn't wait for an answer prior to leaping off her barrel and tackling her unprepared brother onto the ground, cutting off his assumed insipid reply. The two wrestled and tussled about, fighting for the upper hand, until Ruff clambered on top of her squirming sibling, wrenching back his tattooed arm and digging a knee into the small of his back in victory.

"Okay, okay! I relent!" Tuff conceded begrudgingly, and when his

sister smashed further on his ensnared arm in a threat to dislocate his shoulder, he howled, "DEAR ODIN, I RELENT!"

"It looks like we have a winner," Fishlegs declared in an accurate representation of Mulch's commentating of the Thawfest games, a small grin of pride and fondness playing on his lips as he watched Ruff dominate the struggle.

"Ruffnut," Hiccup glanced behind him from scribbling on the board, his voice carrying a note of authority in it as he addressed the female twin, "That's enough. You've made your point."

With a roll of her eyes, Ruff climbed off her male counterpart, who rolled onto his back and groaned without shame from the stinging in his arm socket.

"Ugh...I'm hurt..."

Snotlout wobbled over and, despite the taller boy's behavior towards him earlier, supplied a helping hand to Tuffnut. When the male twin clasped wrists with the brunet and heaved Tuff to his feet, Snotlout muttered under his breath to the blond, "Damn women, huh?"

"You said it, man," grimaced Tuff in assent, rolling his sore shoulder on his way back over to perch atop his roost of boxes, "But, we gotta love them, eh?"

"Definitely," the stouter of the two youths honed in his yearning gaze on Astrid, who seemed to be lost in a deep reverie.

"All right, everyone," Hiccup spun away from writing on the blackboard - now halved with a line of chalk drawn down the median of its surface - and clapped his hands together, "Let's get started!"

The other riders approached the boxes and barrels with caution, save for a delinquent Astrid, who shifted her weight onto one leg and folded her arms defiantly. Hiccup tried to ignore her obstinate stance, however, his eyes intermittently darted over to her figure, making eye contact with those aquamarine irises. Any time before that day, he would have described her eyes as cool, refreshing imitations of the seawater that lapped along Thor's Beach; now, those orbs stared with a frozen determination, scalding like an ice block pressed onto sunburnt skin. He longed for the ice to melt back into seawater.

"So," Hiccup started briskly, "Today you're having a pop quiz!"

A chorus of grumbling from the twins and Snotlout drowned out Fishlegs' excited squeal; Fishlegs' reticent demeanor dispelled into nonexistence whenever a battle of brains and knowledge retention presented itself.

"Now, don't give me that. It'll be fun, I swear."

"But your quizzes are so hard," lamented Ruff sullenly, elbows propped up on her barrel and hands cupping her sharp chin.

"And I get these massive headaches when they're over," Tuff added, rubbing his temples and scrunching his eyes shut to accentuate his

point.

"Not to mention they take forever to finish!" Snotlout chimed in with his two cents.

"And I hate being teamed up with her!"

"Well, I hate being teamed up with her!"

"I'm not a girl, butt elf!" Tuffnut rebuked his sister heatedly, frustrated from her constant jabs at him being a female; he despised everything dainty and delicate, pounding his sinewed chest like an ape to display his Viking manliness.

"Come on, guys," Fishlegs attempted to support Hiccup in his much safer teaching method, "It's not that bad." He turned to address the headmaster directly, raising his pudgy hand as if reciting an oath, "I, for one, enjoy your quizzes, Hiccup."

"Thanks, Legs," Hiccup imparted his appreciation to the larger boy.

"Any time."

Hiccup dipped his head towards a sated Fishlegs, gratified to know that at least one person among them sided with him - that role quintessentially belonged to Astrid, however the flaxen-haired beauty abandoned that ship following last night's catastrophe. The estranged boy desperately needed a lesson in romantics and other courting practices if he wanted to win her heart, but earning back her platonic friendship would be his foremost priority - girls and their sophisticated feelings.

Hiccup gestured instructively between the teenagers and the wooden podiums, "I want the twins and Snotlout on my left here as one team and Fishlegs and Astrid on my right here as the other team."

"Argh! Why are we always stuck with Snotface?" Ruffnut continued to complain, tugging at her oiled plaits in forlorn exasperation.

"Yeah!" Tuffnut concurred belligerently, smacking his fist onto his box spire. "Snotlout is as dumb as a rock! No offense, dude," he amended quickly, holding up a defensive hand when Snotlout snorted and raised a hammy fist in warning, "Why can't we have one of the other two for a change?"

"Give us Fishlegs! He's got book smarts," demanded the female twin, pointing an indicative finger at the blond boy, who blushed furiously from both shyness and delight when the girl of his infatuation wanted him to become a member of her team. Tuff wagged his head in agreement at his sister's suggestion.

Hiccup huffed from exhaustion, relinquishing power over the matter in exchange for not losing the last shreds of his sanity to something as trivial as picking teams.

"Okay, I hear you. Fishlegs, if you would like to join the twins, go ahead," Hiccup gave in to the contesting cries of the twins. Following Fishlegs' toothy smile and slight stumbling over to the

Thorston's side, Hiccup afforded Astrid a forced look of indifference when he consented, "Well, Astrid, it looks like you'll be on Snotlout's team."

Snotlout brightened when he heard that, before sobering from the frown the blonde sported at the news; his libido pulsed harder whenever she played "hard to get".

"Whatever you say, _chief_," Astrid bit with impudence, the patronizing tone in how she addressed his future title not passing unnoticed by the russet-haired boy. Apparently her thoughts still lingered on what he pretentiously - and stupidly - claimed last night, flouncing his birthright in her face even though he despised the idea of lording over all of Berk; presiding over the other dragon riders proved taxing enough. The insincerity in her words cut into Hiccup's heart unforgivingly, the brass edge she laced into his premature title containing more spite than anything that the son of _Spitelout_ himself could throw at him.

A theatrical catcall of condescension slipped from Ruff's lips as her eyes shifted back and forth between Hiccup and the other blonde, recognizing a brusque change in the interactions of their previously amicable relationship. Any rift in their affable exchanges meant a much higher chance of the smitten boy turning to Ruff for comfort, or at least to slander Astrid and her loathsome flawlessness.

"Looks like there's trouble in paradise..."

"Oh boy, I sure do love me some drama!" exclaimed Tuffnut, exacerbating Hiccup's nervousness while pulling out a piece of yak jerky from under his helmet and chewing on it expectantly.

Meanwhile, Hiccup's embarrassment established itself by creeping up the back of his neck, a rising wave of scarlet shame, and he could only wish that the ground beneath him would split open and swallow him whole.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

On the other hand, Astrid took the mocking in full stride and crossed her arms in defiance, furrowing her brows at the female Thorston and throwing down the proverbial gauntlet with a mum allegation - a dare to justify knocking out the other girl. Ruff, however, knew the allowed extent of her leash, and when she reached the end its length, she deliberately hushed but didn't retract any of her teasing.

"So, his _Majesty_ is already calling himself chief now?" Snotlout affronted, posing the question to no one in particular as his contempt of Hiccup's pretension flared, "What, can't wait 'til Uncle Stoick kicks the bucket to rule over us, toothpick?"

"No," Hiccup gainsaid in agitation, slapping a palm to his forehead to harness control of his temper, not liking what his cousin insinuated. Snotlout seemed to always challenge Hiccup in all the decisions he made, as if he contested him at every turn on sheer principle - a half-witted Viking obstacle whose obduracy would be his undoing. "And no, I _don't_ call myself that."

"Sure, because we all believe that pile of yak dung," antagonized the brunet brazenly, leaning into Astrid on his right and whispering smugly, "We both know I would make a better chief."

The blonde simply tumbled her puffy eyes away from the boy's flattery, smacking his head and covering his idolizing gaze with his spare helmet. Snotlout yapped in surprise, but Astrid tuned out the snickers from the other team as she shook her head wearily at the stocky teenager's blatant and insistent passes to woo her. She may have a cumbersome bone to pick with Hiccup and his ignorance, but her gripes with him didn't lessen her perpetual distaste for the pedantic brunet and his uncouth suave. Sweet talk? More like sweat talk, because Snotlout reeked of the pungence daily, the unpleasant stench assaulting her nose like that of dragon droppings.

"Oi-!"

"Just don't get in my way," she warned, "I'm winning this thing, bunion boy."

"Ew! Nasty!" interjected the twins in unison.

Stuffing his helmet back into his dark locks, Snotlout's eyebrows shot up and vanished within his bangs at the mention of his old bunion, but he couldn't interrogate her about how she learned of that when his pesky cousin interrupted and reverted everyone's attention to him. Hiccup always hogged the spotlight during Academy lessons, Snotlout thought bitterly.

"All right! Ladies and gentlemen, let's begin the quiz. Remember, this is not a competition!"

"Not yet, it's not," murmured Fishlegs, to which the twins chuckled conspiratorially, mischievous eyes flashing from the large blond to his Academy rival, Snotlout.

"Dragons, go entertain yourselves for the time being," Hiccup bid graciously to the reptiles, who typically never left their rider's side while under the chain-linked dome of the arena, "We'll be done with this lesson in a little bit."

"Fat chance," Snotlout jeered rudely, not bothering to prevent his weedy cousin from overhearing the righteous ridicule.

With a flourish of his hands, Hiccup left the dragons to their own devices, and immediately Toothless trotted back to where Stormfly reverently groomed her impeccable scales, bobbing his head solemnly, which the Nadder responded to enthusiastically. Observing their behavior for a moment, he identified and entrusted to memory the various warbles, croons, and growls that punctuated the speech of their ancient and cryptic language. He wished, eventually, to unlock the secrets of dragon communication, which would open up a whole new world to understanding the behaviors and cultures of the noble beasts.

Hiccup averted his gaze to the other teenagers, pushing aside his uneasiness that Astrid's glare elicited, and rambled along with the first question from his notebook.

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The Night Fury bounded over effortlessly to the preening Deadly Nadder with fluid, feline leaps, coming to rest beside her and jerking his wide head forward in greeting, ear plates flapping around freely from the up and down motions. She reciprocated the head bobbing vigorously, which permitted Toothless to speak with her in the Old Speech or, as Hiccup would later come to call it, Dragonese.

'Salutations, Stormfly.'

'And salutations to you, One Without Teeth.'

Toothless puffed indignantly through his nostrils, charcoal smoke coiling and dissipating into the crisp winter air, before plopping down next to Stormfly to watch their humans. He blinked with interest at the blonde girl - Astrid, they called her, whom his boy harbored mating urges for - as she pummeled the vertically challenged Viking who rode Hookfang with her talonless paw. He didn't understand what his Hiccup saw in her to become so enraptured in her presence, but he confessed that his day-to-day learnings of human behavior still contained the most holes and false information out of all the animals he classified.

'How has your rider been?' inquired Toothless, twisting his neck to the side to judge the Nadder's implicit tics.

'You mean not including the usual pointless maiming of nature?' Stormfly countered with her own question, and receiving a nod to elaborate further, she crooned, _'Well...she seems much more irregularly angry at everything. I can only assume it's because of _your_ boy, from what happened a sunset ago.'_

_'_My_ boy?'_ parroted the Night Fury, offended that she would suggest such an untruth, _'As I recall, it was _your_ girl who instigated the quarrel!'_

Stormfly squawked and smacked Toothless in the hind leg with her unprimed tail, defending Astrid by stating, _'Please! He obviously provoked her wrath with that odd question he asked her. Whatever "marrying" him entails, she clearly wanted no part in it.'_

'Are you suggesting my Hiccup is at fault for your girl becoming sour with him?!' Toothless faced the ludicrous Nadder, raising his spines in aggression.

'I don't know, dark one, am I?' she challenged the onyx dragon with equal irritation.

Rather than bestowing an answer to the redundant query, Toothless settled back on his haunches and resumed playing spectator to the young Vikings and their "lesson". He chuckled to himself as the two siblings resorted to slugging each other in the cheek for every wrong answer one would give. He would never unravel the mystery of how Barf and Belch could handle the devastating antics of his otherwise reckless riders and cope with their harebrained ideas without losing all self-control. Either that, or the Zippleback stooped to the twins' level of thriving off of carnage and mayhem, a kind of perverted gratification that could only be slaked with fire and

smoke. In his speculating, the Night Fury detected his friend whine in defeat.

'All right, I apologize for vilifying your boy; I should give him more credit, after all he has done for us.' recanted Stormfly earnestly, but her admission fell on deaf ear plates, as the other dragon made no indication to suggest he heard her. _'For Draco's sake, be reasonable, Toothless! Meet me halfway here!_' She huffed with slighted offense, imploring, _'Don't give me the cold wing!_'

Toothless let his half-lidded eyes drift to his right, where Stormfly sidled up uncomfortably close, invading his bubble of personal space like a Skrill infiltrating a Fireworm Queen's nest. In spite of his pupils dilating back to normal, the dragon rolled them in lukewarm annoyance and side-stepped away from the encroaching azure dragon. With a single hop of her avian legs, the insistent Nadder bounded back into the aggrieved Night Fury's bubble, craning her ruffled neck forward to pierce a one-eyed stare at him. Pacing another step away, Toothless noted from his peripheral that his friend jumped to the left again, pursuing him closely in an effort to "bug" him into acknowledging her.

It worked.

'Oh, fine! Apology accepted,' remitted the onyx dragon gruffly, wizening up to Stormfly's expectant look when he finished, _'And I also apologize for charging Astrid with sole blame.'_

Stormfly twittered with satisfaction, until she spotted a smear of dirt on the underside of her wing, screeching in horror and disconcertment at the dark blemish on her perfect scales and hastily grooming it out.

'Germophobe,' Toothless rumbled under his breath with exasperated amusement.

'I heard that.'

The Night Fury flashed his trademark smile at his friend, who attempted an imitation of it with her beak and failed miserably; Toothless could not stifle his laughter in time. Stormfly swatted the insulting dragon with a wing, even though she joined him and chirped a giggle at herself. Her demeanor sobered instantly when she reciprocated the niceties of concern.

'And how is your boy taking the altercation? Is he furious like my Astrid?'

'No, he is more depressed than irate,' warbled Toothless, lost in meditation from dwelling on Hiccup's morose attitude after his fight with the girl, _'Hiccup isn't quick to anger. Although, his sulking puts a damper on flying with him - or doing _anything_ with him, for that matter.'_

With a glance over to her girl, the azure dragon commiserated with him, _'I understand your frustrations. My girl isn't infuriated just some of the time; it's constant now, and her fury takes out all the joy of flying with her, or eating with her...'_

She tapered off into silence, wagging her head in tribulation. Their riders' discord appeared to be weighing heavily on Stormfly's conscience as well, an instance uncustomary for the typically jovial and carefree Nadder.

A new voice exploded out of nowhere; quite literally exploding from a cloud of ignited noxious gas as a dragonesque form dropped in through the voluminous plume of smoke.

'Greetingsss, friendssss!' The dual heads of Barf and Belch spoke in slightly unsynchronized hisses, resulting in one of them always echoing the other and further complicating the question of whether or not a Zippleback counted as one or two dragons - or both. Fluttering in from behind and landed on Stormfly's right, the lime dragon's elongated necks wrapped around to gaze at the other two.

'Salutations, Barf and Belch,' greeted Toothless, cocking his snout in askance, _'Where are the other two?_'

'Hookfang and Meatlug, precisssely?' A confirming coo from the smaller dragon egged Barf and Belch to further disclose what he knew, _'Not possitive, but Meatlug mentioned sssomething about tossssssing a sheep?_'

Stormfly hooted in laughter, feeling embarrassed for the other female of their motley crew, _'Oh, _that_. She is obsessed with that trivial game, and poor Hookfang didn't have the forethought or the wits to say no.'_ She released a drawling breath at the innocent nature of the Monstrous Nightmare, in ironically stark contrast to Snotlout's crass manners. _'I do pity him.'_

'We all pity him,' corrected the two-headed dragon, _'Look at who he has for a rider.'_

Four pairs of draconic eyes flicked over to the brunet Viking, who currently planted a boot on his toppled boxes, arms flexed and conceitedly kissing each bicep; the blonde at his side gagged reflexively at the sight.

'Pathetic,' commented Stormfly, sharing her girl's sentiments on the boy's narcissistic tendencies.

Toothless rounded on the Zippleback sternly, tone tinged with lighthearted humor, _'And you're one - well, _two_ - to talk. Your riders are the culprits of almost all the excessive demolition and common mischief on this island. _And_ you sometimes help them in their devilry!_'

Barf and Belch traded a glance and a devious smirk between his heads, _'Give usss a break, Toothlessssss. At leassst Ruff and Tuff have sssome talent other than blowing ssstuff up, unlike the SSSnotlout boy.'_

'Such as?'

'Ruff can ssskewer a wild boar with her ssspear from a hundred pacesss away!' the lime dragon bragged without being supercilious about it, _'And Tuff isss a massster with fabricssss! Jussst the other day he sssewed a marveloussss pair of curtainssss!_' Both heads sighed

in unison with adoration for the twins, _'Neither of them have a hog face like Hookfang'sss boy.'_

Looking over at the bickering teenagers, Stormfly bounced her head thoughtfully, until she gave a jerk of her immaculate wings and accepted the validation, _'True, you make a substantial argument about Snotlout embodying the likeness of a pig.'_

'It's uncanny,' the Night Fury interjected, nodding at the subjective image of Snotlout with tusks and a porky snout.

'He has a face only a mother could love.'

'Too bad he doesssn't have a mother to love it,' cackled Barf and Belch, clapping his wings behind his ridged back in jest - a draconic version of a high-five.

'Barf!' exclaimed Toothless, half scandalized at the cavalier comment and half desiring to chuckle along with his friends; the simple fact that his dear Hiccup also didn't have a mother guilted him into swallowing his croaking thickly.

'What? It'sss the truth.'

'That's beside the point.' Toothless cleared his throat seriously, hesitant on whether he should seek advice from _Barf and Belch_ of all dragons, _'Stormfly and I have a problem, and since your riders incessantly squabble, maybe you can help.'_

Barf and Belch twisted his serpentine necks, gazing at the Night Fury upside-down with curiosity and humming, _'Yesss?'_

Taking control of the conversation, Stormfly corroborated her friend's claim, _'Indeed, a problem were not well acquainted with as much as you and your twins. Our riders, his boy and my girl, are in a tiff from a complicated dispute they had last sunset.'_ She clucked her tongue reprovingly as she sought for the right words. _'How do we reconcile them? How do you handle Ruff and Tuff when they are in a legitimate spat?'_

'Ussually,' the Zippleback reflected with a wriggle of his broad body, righting his heads to think better, _'If I musst intervene, I sssnag one rider in each of my mouthsss and ssseparate them, while they dangle and ssstruggle futilely in midair until they give up trying to throttle one another. SSSomething about "sssibling rivalry" keepsss them in check.'_

Toothless shook his triangular head and pounded his tail impatiently on the stone, _'Not a _physical_ fight, Barf. She meant a _verbal_ fight, you know, using words instead of claws? A conflict of attitudes, if you will.'_

'Oh. In that cassse, I've got nothing,' the two-headed dragon confessed, watching himself knead his talons into the floor absentmindedly, _'Ruff and Tuff are creaturesss of few wordsss. They're much more expressssssive with their pawsss when they're at oddsss.'_

Stormfly crooned sadly, smoldering with desolation from the hapless circumstances; if her spikes could droop like Toothless' ear flaps

did, they would be as limp as a Snaptrapper's disappointed array of tails when an overhead storm cloud yielded hail instead of rain.

_ 'Well, thanks anyway,' _ mumbled Toothless, woebegone with the lack of guidance he received from the Zippleback in fixing the situation between Hiccup and Astrid.

The onyx dragon cherished an unbreakable bond of loyalty with Hiccup and would always do anything to have his boy be happy, but he knew a mere licking or a playful romping wouldn't suffice this time; Hiccup's deplorable state of mind foundered him deeper than ever before, nightmares and handicap included. The violent blonde Viking truly grew into the bane of Hiccup's existence, his veneration for the girl only second to his devotion to his paramount friendship with Toothless.

_ 'Hello, all!' _ a familiar female warble broke the pensive atmosphere from the ring's entrance.

The dragons turned to find a corpulent Gronckle and a massive Monstrous Nightmare lumbering through the gate. Meatlug beamed sprightly at the presently assembled dragons, while Hookfang's perturbed carriage physically emanated from him with the occasional flare up of his gel-saturated scales and if looks could kill, everyone in the vicinity would be dead.

_ 'Salutations,' _ Toothless replied to Meatlug automatically, before engaging in conversation with the crimson dragon accompanying her, _ 'You seem flustered there, Hooky.' _

Hookfang cast the Night Fury a scintillating glower, barking reproachfully, _ 'Don't call me that. It's demoralizing enough when my rider uses it. And you would be flustered as well if-' _ He cut himself off, inching closer to Toothless and divulging scornfully, _ '...If you were forced into participating in an _asinine_ game with Meatlug. I wanted to claw my eyes out from boredom!' _

_ 'What did you expect from a pastime dubbed "Toss the Sheep"?' _ asked Toothless dubiously, ear plates flat against his neck in doubt of the Nightmare's common sense.

_ 'I thought we were tossing a sheep...like, off a cliff or something,' _ Hookfang wiggled his frame from an involuntary muscle spasm as Toothless snorted, _ 'I didn't realize we were _catching_ the sheep, also!' _

The smaller dragon choked on his gas from sniggering, _ 'You presumed that an innocuous boy such as _Fishlegs_ - who can't even bring himself to harm a fly - would be tolerant of chucking a sheep over the cliffside, plunging it to its rocky and imminent death?' _ Toothless pawed at his eyes to crudely swipe away the tears that accumulated on his lower lids. _ 'You're more naïve than I thought, Hookfang.' _

_ 'Hey, if we were slinging Fungus around, he might be more amenable,' _ retaliated Hookfang, a faint curling of his lip exposing more of the jagged teeth from his underbite.

_ 'I don't suggest you try to play with Phil.' _

'Oh, we did once,' interrupted Meatlug, inserting herself at the tail end of the discussion and startling the other two dragons. The group hushed as the Gronckle elaborated, _'My friend Rockjaw and I, I mean. See, we share a mutual fondness for the game, thus we cornered Phil and lugged him up onto the rooftops with us. Rockjaw landed on top of the blacksmith's shop, while I settled upon the roofing of the house next door. My friend and I hurled him across the gap, back and forth between the buildings - and the poor thing kept bleating with fright - while the blacksmith bellowed at us from below to give him back his sheep! Phil was always in good claws, but it was such a hoot to see the old Viking turn as red as Hookfang's hide!'_

As Meatlug neared the conclusion of her tale, the listening dragons howled with laughter, picturing a fuming Gobber waving his hook at the pair of Gronckles menacingly but uselessly, at the same time a sheep rocketed to and fro, a woolly celestial body drawing perfect parabolic arcs in the sky. The more they lingered on the image, the more hilarious it became. The first to recover smirked with his magenta gums, bearing his namesake with mirth.

'I never knew...you had it in you...to do something so...out of line, Meatlug!' Toothless managed to wheeze out in between gulps of air.

_'Well, it _was_ Rockjaw's idea...'_ conceded the Gronckle with a flutter of her pygmy ears, _'...but I approved!'_ She winked at the panting Night Fury, _'I'm a rebel when I want to be. You just don't see it when my rider is _mothering_ me. He's too gentle for his own good.'_

'Says the one who licks his toes,' Stormfly pointed out by poking her tongue out and miming licking a set of feet.

'They get dirty!'

'Go lick SSSnotlout'sss toesss then. He doesssn't have a mother to do it for him.'

'All right, knock it off with the mother jokes, Barf,' warbled Toothless stringently during which Hookfang gnashed his fangs at the Zippleback for the caustic remark.

The lime dragon grunted his compliance and galloped over to the teenagers to detach his riders off of Snotlout, where a skirmish broke out and put their "lesson" on hold. Once Barf and Belch stepped into the fray, the brunet Viking remembered his own dragon, who lounged in the rare winter sunlight lazily.

"Help, Hookfang!" Snotlout shouted from amidst the Viking body parts which encased him in the petty brawl, "HOOKFANG! HELP!" The short Viking watched appalled as his Monstrous Nightmare - the most ruthless of all the dragon species in his biased opinion - tumbled his bright eyes from the banal scenario taking place and launched himself through the gateway.

"Now, Snotlout-!" Hiccup started to chastise his cousin when a higher voice commanded her own dragon into action.

"Stormfly, fetch!" sang Astrid imperatively, lending a demonstrative

finger to whom the Nadder needed to collect - but she didn't point at Snotlout. Her slim digit indicated a wiry teenager with an auburn mop of hair.

With an aloof jolt of his wings from the victim's Night Fury, Stormfly dashed across the enclosure and, not heeding the pleas of the boy, snatched Hiccup by the scruff of his tunic and lifted him from the ground to hang. Hiccup, eyes half-lidded and trained on the Viking oppressor, folded his arms in discomfiture and glared at the blonde. He didn't have time nor the patience to be manhandled by his crush's dragon, because his less complacent fancying of the stunning girl spurred him into maintaining an emotional front against her.

"Put me down, Astrid."

"Not until Snotface has had his ass thoroughly handed to him on a silver platter."

The volatile scuffle lasted another couple of minutes, finally finishing as Ruffnut brutally crushed the brunet beneath her into victorious submission while Barf and Belch's heads initiated an impromptu game of Tug-of-War with Tuffnut's body. A hand motion later and Hiccup discerned solid ground under his boot and Stormfly scampered over to Toothless' side.

'I better go rescue the male sibling from being ripped in half by his dragon,' groaned Meatlug, mortified by the possible prospect of witnessing Viking blood and entrails if she didn't mediate the situation. The Gronckle trampled the stone hurriedly in her mission to save Tuff from the jaws of his lime partner in crime - her mothering instincts kicked in whenever a living creature might be in peril.

When Toothless and Stormfly found themselves alone together once more, a novel idea hatched inside the onyx dragon's intelligent brain. The fleeting thought would require the cooperation of the Nadder next to him if he wanted it to go off without a hitch. A two-dragon cipher to solve a two-Viking riddle.

'Stormfly, I have observed the interactions of humans for quite some time,' Toothless noted sagely, _'And their behaviors are not unlike our own.'_

'Go on,' the Nadder pressed, her interest piqued.

'Well, concerning the process of resolving conflict, we dragons fight it out until one contender surrenders or is slain,' he continued, paw tracing studious circles in the dust of the arena, _'And likewise, Vikings reach a solution in a similar fashion, using those glorified sticks.'_

Rapt by the inevitable point around which Toothless slowly hedged, Stormfly stayed quiet in respect of the other dragon's thought process. The onyx dragon rose to all fours and bore a determined stare into the Nadder, bereft of hesitation in his ruminations. He discovered the solution to their predicament, one that could have outstanding repercussions if he executed what manifested as a bold maneuver to repair their riders' amity as well as progress their courtship.

'However, that commonly occurs between opponents who don't possess a deep-rooted friendship,' relented the Night Fury, before explaining, 'Our riders do, and there is an alternative method of reconciliation that dragons practice if the feuding individuals are amiable and opposites...'_

A puzzled expression spread across Stormfly's face, and Toothless nudged her along by pointing out a strangely obvious fact.

'Opposites as in my Hiccup is a boy...and your Astrid is a girl...'

'What do you - wait,' she paused, her eyes widening and wings flapping anxiously when she put two and two together, '_Oh!_...but, are you sure...?'_

'I have never been so sure of anything in my life, Stormfly,' he persuaded the Nadder, astutely reeling her onto his side.

'I don't know, Toothless...what if it backfires and jeopardizes their bond more?'

Toothless snorted to pronounce his adamant stance on his decision, having already begun to mentally plot how to carry out his scheme, 'If it works for dragons, why wouldn't it work for Vikings? We don't want them to kill each other, so this is a much more sensible path to bring peace between them, which is what we both want, right?'

Stormfly still seemed doubtful about the whole affair, but nodded in assent and consented her assistance as Toothless finally declared his intentions aloud.

'Now, we need to figure out a way to get our humans to mate.'

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><p>AN: **Oh, Toothless, you have much to learn about human behavior; let's hope it doesn't get out of hand. Did anyone catch the Dragonheart reference? Next chapter is pivotal to this story's outline, as well as the character development of our favorite Viking couple - meaning heaps of Hiccstrid feels and angst! Don't forget to review please, and speculate how Toothless will execute his plan. Diskonnekt out.

7. Chapter Seven

**A/N: **Well, as with all of my chapter updates, I'm late once again, and I apologize for that. I felt awful for leaving you guys - and gals - hanging for such a long time, but complications with my surgery caused delays and thus I won't be able to leave until late February. But, I pumped myself up to get this 9,000 word chapter uploaded for my lovely readers, since I keep breaking my promises and the update never comes to fruition. I hope this is up to your reading standards, since this entire story is being worked on by me; I have

no beta reader. Hiccstrid gruff and Hiccstrid fluff,
incoming!

****Disclaimer:** **I should just stop putting a disclaimer on every chapter update. If the copyright police don't understand by now that this story is for fun and not for money, then, I'm sorry, but their intelligence quotient is awfully low. However, this alternate universe is most certainly _mine_.

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><p>Chapter Seven

"To the Cave"

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Six sunsets following Hiccup's and Astrid's verbal dissidence in the cove, Toothless maintained a keen eye on the social interactions between the two, all the while scheming discreetly with Stormfly. Within that span of time, the behaviors between their riders consisted of vague questions, curt answers, and a strange lack of physical violence from the blonde. The Night Fury noted that sometimes when Astrid distanced herself from Hiccup with a cold remark, the boy's emerald eyes would trail after her and his nimble fingers would instinctively - but morosely - knead his shoulder. Even the dragon could tell Hiccup missed the now absent bruise that she would leave blooming on his pale skin.

Stormfly stayed vigilant to her rider's mood when the pair took their daily flights without Toothless and Hiccup. Astrid let down her stoic guard during those breathless moments, and the Nadder witnessed a battle warring inside the girl's heart between the freedom of flight and the chains of marriage. The tiny seed of thought that anchored itself in the soil of her worries progressively grew and matured, feeding off the minerals of dogma, the rains of grief, and the sunlight of cynicism.

Now, that ignorant seed reached into the Valhalla of the unknown as a mighty tree of apprehension, with Astrid's dread of what could likely happen multiplying tenfold. Hiccup proposing to her only further corroborated her stifled fears, and forced her to acknowledge that, since she became of age a few years ago, her parents could marry her off at any given moment.

Out of concern for her best friend, Stormfly relayed her observations of her girl's peculiar metamorphosis to Toothless, and asked numerous times if they really should interfere with their riders' relationship. The Night Fury provided the same reply each time the harried Nadder would raise her skepticisms on the delicate situation.

_'My boy needs my assistance to catch any tail. Otherwise, without me, it's an exercise in _futility.'_

At one point, Stormfly ruffled her scales and defended Hiccup's dignity, _'Your boy is sufficiently capable of such endeavors. It sounds like _you _have no faith in him.'_

_'When I'm riding the trade winds with Hiccup, he has my full

confidence and I trust him completely,'_ Toothless reasoned, ear plates flush along his neck and chartreuse eyes half-lidded in annoyance, '_But my faith in his abilities runs dry when it comes to his mating advances. We've seen clear evidence of _that_.'_

On one particular evening, roughly a week after Snoggletog, Hiccup and Toothless stole one more flight for the day prior to the sun setting. They found themselves gliding in a cloudless sky - a periwinkle canvas barren of any atmospheric moisture, lending to the harsh frigidity of the temperature.

Hiccup canceled class at the Academy earlier in his spoiled dragon's interest, because Toothless made it quite evident upon waking up that his boy didn't fly with him nearly enough as he should. Accordingly, the Night Fury's salmon tongue flopped out of his mouth in bliss from the thrill of stretching his billowed wings and shooting unhindered through the salty air at ungodly speeds, releasing all his pent up energy in the process.

This also happened to be the day that Toothless, with Stormfly's participation, would set in motion his plot to rid Hiccup and Astrid of their bitter enmity by means of unflattering copulation - or so he hoped.

"What do you say, bud, one more lap around the island before we turn in?" Hiccup inquired of his friend over the blustery gusts of wind whipping past, causing the boy's russet locks to streamline behind him. Toothless tossed his head in concurrence, even though his worries that the dragons' plan might fall through muddled his preoccupied mind.

As his rider readjusted the tail fin in preparation for a final blast around Berk, Toothless swung his flat head to and fro, searching the surrounding skies for an azure dragon and, more importantly, a blonde Viking. Hiccup took notice of the dragon's hyper-alert behavior, but filed it away as nothing more than Toothless' energetic gratification for flying - possibly elevated from soaring above a different portion of the island.

By the time they rounded the easternmost point of Berk, Toothless' anxiety plagued him with fears that Stormfly might not show, betraying his staunch faith in his draconian ally. The time came for the Nadder to appear in the air near Hiccup and Toothless, and yet the onyx dragon and his boy remained the sole creatures slicing through the frosty skies.

_'Where is that bird-brained dragon?' _the Night Fury inwardly grumbled, the onset of stewing irritation teasing the covert stress under his carefree façade.

"Come on, Toothless!" encouraged Hiccup, lowering his torso into the saddle with a lopsided grin permanently plastered on his face, "Faster! The breeze will eat our dust!"

The dragon roared a guttural crow, baring his teeth and collapsing his wings ever so slightly, permitting him and his rider to shoot forward with the precision of a falcon and the grace of an eagle. Tiny bumps erupted along Hiccup's bare forearms, a rash of visible cold prickling his skin while the saltiness of the atmosphere assaulted his nose. The sting of the airborne brine bit at Toothless'

snout as well, but with a twitch of his nostrils aided by his heightened olfactory, he detected a new scent - new, but not unfamiliar.

The smell of lard polish, one which he became accustomed to associating with the most vain of his friends.

Toothless' stellar senses upheld their remarkable reputation, as his acute gaze spotted a racing speck against the horizon ahead of him, slowly swelling in size. Crooning to Hiccup a brief apology for his impending transgression, the dragon launched towards the dark dot, a spurt of unrivaled speed urging him to surge ahead with utmost haste.

"Yeah, baby!" Hiccup exclaimed with jubilation, ignorant to the distant newcomers which his Viking vision could not distinguish, "This is spectacular! We're unstoppable! We-!"

He cut his praises short at the sight of another dragon flying in front of them, close enough for the sun's rays to glint off the unmistakable sheen of a Deadly Nadder's hide - and reflect off her rider's metal spaulders. Hiccup's eyes widened in dismay, despite the abuse of the wind instantly drying them out; he ignored the petty burning while he struggled to shift the tail fin's position into a steep bank.

The Night Fury wriggled rebelliously beneath his boy - he would have none of that.

Each time Hiccup clicked his prosthetic to adjust the dragon's fake fin, Toothless swatted his whole tail and yanked the scarlet leather askew, until finally the bewildered teenager cried out, "Toothless! What are you doing?!"

Hiccup's query slammed into a wall of stony silence. His gaze cut back to the approaching silhouette, and he could distinguish the crown of spikes on Stormfly's head and the crown of shimmering flaxen hair on the girl's head.

"Toothless, stop!" the boy implored desperately, unsuccessfully jerking the stirrup into another random position and causing the duo to lurch wildly, "That's Astrid! I don't want to face her right now! Please, bud!"

Again, the dragon made no indication that he heard Hiccup's pleas, reminding himself he needed to do this for Hiccup's own good. Homing in on the Nadder, they could now see the individual spikes on Astrid's flapping skirt, and watch their erratic flying of jolts and lurches - Astrid also seemed to be having difficulty getting her dragon to divert their flight path.

"No, no! Toothless, listen to me!" wailed Hiccup, mortified by the expectation of another sour encounter with Astrid, whose kransen winked at him in mockery.

'Close enough,' Toothless surmised once the two dragons flapped a stone's throw away from each other, before doing the unthinkable, 'My sincerest apologies, dear friend.'

With a fatal swish of his powerful tail to the right, the strain on

the joints of the iron rod connecting the mechanized stirrup to the prosthetic fin exceeded its limit, and Toothless braced himself. A clattering shink rang out behind Hiccup as the crucial rod popped off and careened away to vanish among the trees, immediately followed by a flailing Night Fury and his helpless rider.

Hiccup and Toothless practiced free-falling almost on a daily basis, but these stunts maintained a level of control - this uncoordinated plunge proved to be nothing but pure chaos.

"Hiccup!" Astrid screamed in paralyzed horror, her mouth agape while witnessing her frenzied best friend plummet to the ground and to his imminent death. She may still be frustrated with the crazy boy, but if he died on her, she would kill him - not that that made any sense. Pointing at the rapidly shrinking boy, the blonde shouted hysterically to her dragon, "Stormfly, dive! DIVE!"

Stormfly slapped her wings flush to her flanks, narrowing her avian contours to garner the least amount of air resistance, despite knowing it would be all for naught. Toothless executed his half of the plan without err up to this point; the fact that he destroyed his rigging didn't render the dragon completely flightless, because he could hover just fine. The loss of the rod meant stripping Hiccup of any command over where they flew - or where they would crash.

Nonetheless, Toothless did forget to take one significant detail into account - he bore Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third upon his back, the Viking who became notorious for messing up even the most simplistic of plans without even trying - and so Hiccup inadvertently did exactly that.

Remembering something he did while helping Toothless to fly again, Hiccup unclipped his leather riding gear from the saddle and swiveled about to face the bicolored tail. Shimmying down his dragon's back, he approached the lifeless fake fin and grabbed it tightly in his right hand, yanking it out as he called back to Toothless.

"Toothless! Fly up! I'll help keep your tail-"

With a stomach churning jerk, the disobedient dragon slammed his powerful tail forward, then back, causing Hiccup to lose his grip and be flung away. Now Hiccup and Toothless dropped closer and closer to the treetops, separated and doomed.

"HICCUP!" screeched Astrid, her heart pounding wildly in her chest as a lone tear escaped from her blistering eyes, "Faster, Stormfly! Oh, Odin above, please save them!"

Even though Hiccup hiccuped his plan a little bit, the Night Fury still retained control of the situation. At the last possible second, Toothless pounced through the air onto his boy, wrapping him in his enormous wings after redirecting their course towards the intended clearing. With a hard smack, the dragon crash landed into the rocky dirt of the forest clearing, bumping along the ground and leaving behind a huge furrow in his wake. The dark mass lay motionless in the spot where his body eventually stopped tumbling.

Before the dust clouds engulfing them could dissipate, Hiccup broke

out of the draconic cocoon, coughing and wheezing from the heart attack he almost suffered. As Toothless righted himself and shook the debris off his scales, Hiccup rounded on him.

"TOOTHLESS! What were you thinking?!" cried the boy in shock, stifling another coughing fit to accuse his friend further, "You nearly got us KILLED!"

The persecuted dragon wagged his head and crooned sadly just as Astrid and Stormfly touched down and plodded to a halt by them.

"Hiccup, you're alive! You're okay?!" Astrid leapt off of her Nadder's back and embraced Hiccup in a breathless hug, trembling as she pulled him tight to her. The fear emanated from her in waves, but quickly began to calm once she knew of Hiccup's safe disposition.

"Yeah, I'm all right," Hiccup reassured her, adding bitterly as he threw a hand at Toothless, "No thanks to him."

The Night Fury snorted his denial of that statement, then turned to Stormfly and tossed his head in commandment, _'It's time.'_

"Thank the gods! Here, let me have a look at you," the blonde insisted as she started a meticulous inspection for wounds on the boy. Both teenagers became oblivious to their dragons in that brief exchange, and they immediately took advantage of their riders' ignorance to them.

"No, Astrid, really I'm fine. Right now I have a bone to pick with my _useless_"

A flash of azure zipped past the conversing Vikings as Stormfly flew at ground level, and banked sharply back around once her talons clutched Toothless by his hind legs. Hiccup and Astrid watched in shock as the Nadder lifted her charge into the sky, flying away in the direction of the village.

"STORMFLY!"

"TOOTHLESS!"

"Come back!"

"Drop him, Stormfly!"

Their yelling became a fruitless endeavor, as the dragons' silhouette shrank away. Toothless summoned the nerve to look back at the two baffled teenagers, head upside down, and used his tail fin to flap at them: a gesture of farewell.

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_ 'Remember, fly only until they cannot discern us anymore, and then-'_ the dangling dragon began, dormant pine and oak trees whisking by beneath him.

_ 'I know, I know, "...and then land promptly so that we can fetch our riders after they resolve their fragmentation with a mating ritual.'" '

_Stormfly parroted in the Night Fury's throaty speech, scales ruffling in mild annoyance.

'I don't sound like that!' _Toothless denied adamantly, glowering up at Stormfly.

'What I was going to say before I was so rudely interrupted is that I am not Barf and Belch, always forgetting things...' She clucked her tongue disapprovingly out of habit.

Swinging lethargically in her grasp, the onyx dragon mused, _'Which is ironic.'_

'Wherefore?'

'You recall that human phrase, "Two heads are better than one?" Not in his case, I reckon.'

The Nadder trilled with amusement, _'I concur. That wyvern is almost as destructive as his riders.'_

'Verily,' agreed Toothless and, spotting a rock formation among the steeples of bark below, warbled up to his bearer, _'Land near that rubble, it's far enough to provide them their privacy. May the exalted Saphira consecrate their sacred union.'_

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Hiccup and Astrid stood unmoving in the small clearing, mouths ajar, witnessing their best friends disappear into the southwestern horizon. From the north, puffy stacks of cumulus clouds brimmed the backdrop of the sky, scattering birds and squirrels to their homes, their sixth sense for impending danger tingling. A stagnant hush stretched between the pair of flabbergasted Vikings, until Hiccup broke it with a guttural cry of exasperation.

"Fine! Take him! By Odin's beard! I can't deal with all of this right now!" Hiccup fumed to the sky, clenched fists flailing around him, turning and kicking a lone pinecone angrily with his prosthetic. Speechless, as well as having no desire to interact with a raving Hiccup, Astrid walked a short distance away from him and sat herself on a fallen log.

Hiccup gazed at the now pinprick blemish in the distance, the dragons having dropped significantly closer to the ground, and brooded.

What in the name of Thor overcame Toothless? It felt as though his dragon not merely tried, but wanted to crash - he undoubtedly meant to break his tail rigging. And then, he just abandoned him? Toothless would kill any Viking, dragon, or living thing that made to separate him from Hiccup; but he willingly let Stormfly take off with him in her claws. None of it made any sense.

Wait. Toothless didn't begin acting strangely until they came upon Astrid up in the sky with them. Hiccup spun to face the seated girl.

"What were you doing up there anyway?" he demanded gruffly, an impatient tap in his boot.

Astrid straightened up, immediately crossing her arms protectively and explaining curtly, "Flying with Stormfly. What else could I have possibly been doing?"

"Toothless and I were fine until we bumped into you," stated Hiccup derisively, reining his anger to keep himself in check, but otherwise afforded Astrid his agitation for their current predicament. He didn't purposefully mean to incite another argument, but everything seemed to be getting out of hand and Astrid happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Her eyes narrowed dangerously, standing up slowly with balled fists and scowling, "Are you accusing me of something?"

"And what if I am?" the chief's son politically answered her question with a question of his own - so he did pay attention to his father's diplomacy lessons - but he didn't wait for a response as he plowed on, "It was your dragon that carried Toothless off."

"I didn't do anything!" retorted Astrid, stepping closer to him.

"Exactly! You let your egregious reptile fly off with him," Hiccup countered, his slight against Stormfly not entirely intentional. The insult on her best friend infuriated the shaking girl as he concluded cynically, "And now I'm stuck here in the middle of nowhere with you."

Irked by Hiccup's persistent blame game, Astrid bristled, "I couldn't stop her! Did it occur to you that I was more concerned about your well-being as opposed to what my dragon was doing! And as for who's stuck with who?" She stomped into Hiccup's personal space and muttered fiercely, "I would rather be stranded here with Snotlout than with you!"

The northern front darkened into a charcoal hue, rolling for the island at an unprecedented celerity, but the bickering teenagers failed to notice the abrupt weather change. The chirping of birds and crickets long since died out, leaving the only sound that nature uttered coming from dead leaves being tossed haphazardly by the increasing wind gusts.

"Yeah, well, so would I!" exclaimed Hiccup dramatically, throwing his hands up in a flourish and twisting away from the blonde in spite. Astrid mimicked him, folding her arms once more and smacking her bangs aside.

"Good!"

"Great!"

"Fine!"

"Okay! Then..." Hiccup trailed off, the skirmish stalling to a stalemate presided by a strained silence. Hiccup rubbed the back of his neck, then swiped his hand forward into his russet mop of hair and over his eyes, his excessively analytical brain getting the better of him. The warmth of the late evening sun evaporated as the storm clouds, speeding southwards at an unsuspecting Berk, blocked out its brilliant rays. Nervously wetting his lips, Hiccup addressed

Astrid without turning to face her.

"Well, in all honesty...I wouldn't want to be out here with Snotlout," Hiccup confessed, biting his lower lip before continuing, "The guy just does not shut up about himself."

Astrid deflated at his trademark back-pedaling and sighed heavily, breathing a quiet laugh that escaped through her mask of fury, and replied, "Yeah, me neither. It's always either 'Snotlout, Snotlout, oi, oi, oi!' or 'Did you fall from Valhalla? Because you're the hottest valkyrie in Midgard.' I mean, gross!"

Upon hearing that his cousin called his crush "valkyrie", Hiccup dug his fingernails into his palms, leaving crescent moons indented into his skin. Suddenly, an ear-splitting rumble erupted from behind the teenagers, and they whipped around to behold a roiling storm almost completely on top of them; the first blizzard of devastating winter.

"Oh, gods..." whispered Astrid, her eyes wide with terror and her face draining of color. She cupped her hands to her mouth to call for Stormfly, but Hiccup grabbed her elbow and shook his head.

"There's no time! We need to go. Now."

Hiccup grabbed Astrid's hand and started to head back in the direction of the village, but she yanked it from his grip and brushed past, clipping shoulders in the process. He did not have permission to be holding her hand, she declared to herself, considering the instability of their friendship, especially after he went and almost got himself killed - again. Hiccup huffed with defeat and jogged after the fleet-footed girl into the border of dormant trees.

He wouldn't disclose it to Astrid then, but Hiccup didn't walk away from the crash landing completely unscathed - he tweaked his left knee. Consequently, each time his prosthetic clicked to the dirt, his knee directly above would pinch and reverberate with pain inside its protective sock. The boy ignored it, for bigger problems demanded their undivided attention, such as freezing to death in the middle of the forest - leave that to the Vikings on Freezing-to-Death.

Neither of them spoke a word to relieve the tense atmosphere hanging in their midst. They dashed through the trees in short bursts, because Hiccup didn't possess the endurance from a daily running routine that Astrid did. It didn't help that he injured his leg, but he refused to let it slow him down even more.

He didn't want to feel more like a wimp in his crush's presence than he already did.

Hiccup knew he shouldn't have snapped at her earlier, but his confusion from Toothless' mutiny coupled with his confusion from Astrid racing to his rescue - it all overwhelmed him. He focused on figuring out how to broach the subject without it deteriorating into another shouting match. Sweat trickled down his brow as he debated on picking what words to say, and when to say them; he would most likely never grow out of his lack of tact.

Glancing back at the advancing clouds, Hiccup realized the storm outmatched them for speed, no matter if he could sustain a paced

run.

Astrid hacked and slashed up ahead at some dead thickets in her path, using this violence against nature as her personal venting session to cool off from all the irritation that bubbled within her chest. The epinephrine pumping from her adrenal glands and allowing her blood to course faster through her energized the girl, supplying power to her swings and a sick satisfaction when her autotrophic enemies crumpled at her feet.

If truth be told, her racing heart ached for cordial amity with Hiccup once more, but how could they after the question-bomb he dropped on her? She could apologize, but the boy still needed to demonstrate that he cared about her for her, and not as an obligation.

The auburn mop of hair tilted back as Hiccup observed the rushing front above them, grumbling with a murky intensity. He considered making a desperate call for their dragons, but they would never hear it in the village. A thick flurry of tiny snowflakes whirled around the boy and over the girl, diverting her attention to the sky.

"It's here," announced Hiccup ominously, his stump complaining with a twinge when he slipped on a loose pebble.

"Then there's no time to tarry. Time is against us," Astrid responded dryly, uncharacteristically formal with her speech.

"Time may have already run out."

The blonde spared Hiccup a half smile of silent agreement, then returned to cutting a path through the undergrowth at a hurried pace.

Proceeding the initial flurry of snowflakes came a tumultuous downpour of snow and sleet as the blizzard overtook the teenagers. Shivering, they stumbled ahead with drenched clothes clinging to their chilled skin, conditions swiftly worsening as the threat of hypothermia made itself apparent. Ignoring their previous spats, they huddled close together while they stiffly jogged, their destination not much closer than before.

It became nearly impossible to walk with their heads up with the snow relentlessly blasting them from all directions. They trudged through the wilderness, the miniscule shards of ice biting like insects at their flushed cheeks from the constant gales.

"We're going t-to die if we c-c-carry on like this!" chattered Hiccup violently through vibrating teeth.

"Wh-What do you s-suppose we d-do?!" Astrid asked hopelessly, chewing the inside of her cheek and praying he would have a plan to get them out of this dreadful storm, "There's no sh-shelter out here!"

Rubbing his hands together briskly to keep them warm - or, more precisely, less frozen than the rest of his body - Hiccup surveyed their surroundings, hoping to find some miracle refuge which they could escape from the frigid snowstorm. He spun about, arms wrapped close to the riding gear and tunic plastered to his chest, but the

wintry sheets laid siege to his vision, submerging them in a sea of white.

Hiccup pursed his lips and shook his soaking head, disgruntled, and yelled over the blizzard's thunderous roars, "Our b-best bet is to get to the mountains c-closer west. It will at least b-block some of the wind gusts, a-and if we're lucky, we may yet find a c-cave that isn't flooded at its base to wait out the s-storm."

"Okay, l-let's go!" urged Astrid, her small nose a bright rouge and attempting to summon life back into her numb fingers by breathing on them. Her warm breath puffed visibly in the arctic air, a reminder that the temperature would continue to drop well past the freezing point.

"Let's just hope I d-don't lose my other f-f-foot to f-frostbite!" Hiccup managed a shivering smirk with chapped lips at the girl's unamused mien. Instead of taking the bait, she weakly punched him in the shoulder. He grinned sheepishly at the unaggressive act while their footsteps redirected westward.

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'You and your asinine ideas!' squawked Stormfly irritably, the rising white dunes impeding with her running,_'I thought your kind was supposed to be intelligent!_'

Toothless galloped alongside the Nadder, flaring his nostrils with every smoky huff, and indignantly replied, _'I beg your pardon, we _do_ have superior intellect - I could give the almighty Alpha a run for his throne! And I never said this plan wasn't without its flaws!_'

The azure dragon rolled her eyes as they dashed between trees and over rocks; the surrounding landscape changed drastically since the snowstorm rolled in, making the area scarcely recognizable. Why she let her friend persuade her into doing this, she couldn't fathom.

By then, the trees began to thin, and the two dragons swam through the powdery snow like fish in water, until they eventually reached the clearing where Toothless crashed in earlier. Squinting their eyes against the biting wind while they scoured, the gusts blew icy flakes onto their scales, which melted instantly.

'I told you we should have stayed within visual range of them!' Stormfly reiterated pointedly, clucking loudly and letting out an incessant stream of her magnesium fire to melt the snow,_'But _no_, you said if we could see them, then they could see us! By Smaug's missing scale, hopefully the snow didn't destroy all of their scent..._' _She then scampered around with her beak to the squelching ground, a reptilian bloodhound in the brush, trying to pinpoint a scent trail from their riders.

Toothless stood by, panting in wait; his olfactory would be of no use with Stormfly on the case. He gulped worriedly, slanting his head in askance, _'Anything?_'

Stormfly straightened up, melancholic and afraid, _'Nothing.'_'

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The island's short mountain range loomed over the teenaged Vikings, a frightfully grave sentinel amidst the raging tempest. Hiccup and Astrid trudged along at the foot of the towering land mass, both on their last reserves of stamina.

With each hobbling step of his left leg, Hiccup's cold-addled mind noted the pain from the crash disappeared. He wanted to simper, but his numb lips refused to cooperate, and then it hit him - the pain in his stump faded away from being completely numb also.

Wonderful.

Astrid stumbled between Hiccup and the mountain, both of which shielded her from the majority of the vicious winds. Her realistic conscience started losing hope that they would come out of this situation alive. How could they not have noticed the storm clouds making a beeline for Berk? Weather must really be that mundane.

"There!" Hiccup called enthusiastically, his chattering voice nearly swept to insignificance by the gusts of sleet.

Shaken out of her thoughts, Astrid's eyes followed the length of the boy's outstretched arm and toward what his finger pointed at, narrowing in suspicion at what he spotted.

A tall lacuna splitting open the granite at the mountain's base, approximately a man's height high and wider than if he held his arms out to either side. Upon approaching the entrance, the grotto extended back into the mountainside ten strides as the walls narrowed the further back one went.

The two teenagers staggered into the small cave gladly, dripping with every clumsy step, breathing sighs of relief since neither could muster up the energy to laugh. Hiccup knelt down and rested his weary body against a side wall, while Astrid found a weathered boulder and sat with her icy back to it, peering forward into the gloom of the cave. To finally be protected from that whiteout brought a twitch to the corners of their lips; although half frozen already, they wouldn't become ice statues - not today, anyway.

They could not have been out in that horrific storm for more than half an hour, but the two looked as though they took a swim in the ocean, but forgot to remove their clothing.

A startling thought smacked the euphoria from Astrid when she suddenly remembered that their dragons' absence meant no source of warmth. Hiccup and she could still die in this soggy hole without any heat!

Leaping to her feet a little too emphatically, Hiccup locked eyes with hers at the moment she turned on her heel and hurdled over her boulder, making her way towards the exit - and the storm.

"Astrid!" cried Hiccup in panic, scrambling to where she stood at the lip of the cave, prepared to physically restrain her from venturing out there if she tried, "What are y-you doing?! Are y-you insane?!"

She acknowledged him with a flip of her braid, thumbing it absentmindedly, and glanced in his direction with waning determination, "W-We need wood."

"Wood?" The boy scrunched his nose in confusion, wrapping his arms close to himself. "Why?"

"A f-fire, Hiccup. We need a-a heat source," Astrid elaborated tersely, facing him with a sad smile, "I'm going t-to go out and get-"

The boy balked as he cut her off, "G-Go out? Out there?! By the g-gods, no!"

"Hiccup, we need a f-fire-" the blonde insisted, nose twitching and glowing a bright vermillion. She pulled herself up to her full height, feigning her usual confidence, but the movement caused her to sneeze violently.

"Yeah, I heard that, b-but-" Hiccup tried to talk over Astrid, concern etched in his frown lines.

"I w-won't be gone long-"

"Astrid, it's n-no use-"

"I can take c-care of myself-"

"Astrid! Listen to me!" Hiccup's voice cracked from his raw throat as he grasped the girl by her spaulders and shook them, "It's n-no use! All the wood is wet! And even if you found s-some that was dry, you would never make it back alive! J-Just stay here..."

She peered into his pleading face, not exactly knowing what she searched for in those glassy, emerald eyes, or the splash of freckles across his nose.

"Please?" he asked in a whisper, his hands slipping to her upper arms and creating a tingling sensation where he touched her.

Astrid blinked and exhaled loudly, resigning herself to the obvious that there couldn't be any dry wood left, before nodding to reassure Hiccup that she wouldn't abandon him for some reckless endeavor. The boy visibly relaxed as the two trekked back into the confines of the cave, until his body quaked from a chill trickling down his spine. This didn't go unnoticed by the blonde, whose arms remained folded to fend off the cold.

'You could have used your own bodies to keep each other warm...'
Fishlegs' confident remark from last year echoed inside Astrid's head.

"Well, if we don't get a f-fire going...there's only one other way we can stay w-warm enough to survive the night..." Astrid trailed off, growing very awkward and uncomfortable with the idea. With Hiccup's timid expression revealing he probably wouldn't approve of where this line of thought would end, she verbalized the unspoken conclusion, "Using each other's body heat."

"What?! That's...it's...we c-couldn't-" spluttered Hiccup frantically, staring at Astrid as if she sprouted a second head. This scenario could not be any more frightening, especially now with what she insinuated.

"We can, and we have to," Astrid affirmed, already walking past Hiccup to the farthest depths of their grotto, tossing over her shoulder, "If we d-don't, we will certainly die from the freezing b-beating we just took out there." Her spaulders clattered to the stone, but she still felt a pair of eyes watching her. She blushed, although her flushed cheeks hid it entirely, and gave a simple order without addressing her onlooker.

"Turn around."

An undignified squeak slipped out of Hiccup's mouth as he hastily averted his eyes and faced the opposite wall, rubbing the back of his neck roughly.

All the soaked clothing would be removed and laid out on the grimy ground, in hopes that they would dry. It would be impossible for them to stay warm if they stayed in their sopping wet clothes. Hiccup wriggled out of his riding leathers first, now probably ruined by the multitude of water they sustained. He then pulled his woolen tunic off with some difficulty, followed shortly after by his undershirt. He shivered miserably when he exposed his bare chest to the frigid cave. He stepped out of his boots next, dropping his trousers and sash to his foot and hopping from those as well.

After laying his assorted attire along the base of a side wall, Hiccup puffed nervously several times, unsure if he could bear to see his valkyrie bared before him. He heard a throat being tentatively cleared from behind him, which informed him that Astrid stood waiting; he swiveled on his false leg and faced her.

The unsteady boy's breath hitched in his trachea and the stream of consciousness rattling inside his mind choked. Of course, Astrid did not remove everything, just as he didn't either - but all that remained on her curving slopes consisted of some taught bindings over her breasts and white linen wrapping around her nether region, or as the parents described seriously to their scarlet-faced children, the "forbidden area". One slender leg bent inward, resting on the balls of the foot while the knee hid the knee from the leg behind; the hourglass stance made her appear...shy.

He never dreamed in a thousand years he would ever color Astrid as "shy".

Unintentionally, Hiccup glanced up and down at her profile in awe, the creamy alabaster skin plush even in the waning glimpse of the twilight sky from the grotto's entrance. The fidgeting girl, feeling extremely exposed under his steady stare, chewed her lower lip and shielded herself with folded arms in embarrassment; only her parents witnessed her in such a state of undress. How could she be baring herself like this to her friend, who she currently still felt displeasure with? Astrid chose to ignore that her heart may have softened when the boy begged her to stay.

To stay with him, she amended as an afterthought. Not because he cared for her safety, but because he didn't want to be left

alone.

Obviously.

Hiccup also kept on his white linen around his groin, and felt precisely how Astrid did in those first few moments - naked and on display. He really didn't yet believe that his body could be in any way found appealing, which led to why his eyes almost bulged from its sockets at the shocking recognition that the girl standing on the other side of the cave now looked him up and down, taking in his form.

Puberty definitely started affecting Hiccup, Astrid surmised, her gaze sliding up his toned arms, across his broader shoulders, and down his hairless chest to his abdomen. He actually formed some defined sinews and muscles in his upper body, especially in his upper arms. His hips protruded slightly - but not unattractively, she supposed - underneath his skin, and a scruffy line of russet hairs trailed from his belly button down to his-

Why am I checking out my best friend, she scolded herself. Think! We need heat or we will freeze to death, and you're standing here thinking that you're ridiculous friend is more attractive than you first considered? Priorities, Astrid!

Setting her lips in a firm line and pacing forward, Astrid beckoned without emotion, "Come on, let's do this."

Obediently, Hiccup stepped up awkwardly to her side, stating, "We should situate ourselves f-facing the back wall, so that our own backs will take the b-brunt of any winds that blow in."

"Sounds fine b-by me," nodded Astrid, her voice gruffer than usual, but rose severely with her threat, "But if you t-try anything-"

"Astrid, I would n-never! Cross my heart," he swore, tracing a runic "N" on his chest with his index finger.

They sat down on the hard ground, fiddling with their undergarments to make sure, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that they wouldn't accidentally expose themselves. Hiccup gestured for her to lie down, and her left side escalated from cool to freezing when she did. He then followed suit, lying behind her with his blood pulsing in his ears, anxiety holding firm at the thought of embracing her nearly nude body.

And then he threw caution to the wind, grasping the girl by her hips and pulling her back, their linens ruffling and meshing together. She stiffened, and watched intently as the boy snaked his hands up from her hips to her unarmored shoulders, crossing his arms in front of her bosom to where his left hand clutched her right shoulder and his right hand clutched her left shoulder. His chest pressed firmly into her back, the bindings sinking somewhat uncomfortably into his hardened nipples, but he couldn't care less. In his worship of her, he treated her like a sacred goddess and as if his unholy palms should never have been blessed to feel such soft contours.

Their bodies' heat instantly worked its magic, the warmth growing like a stray ember sparking a raging forest fire. As the quivering of

their upper bodies subsided, the two began drawing their legs up closer to their cores when an abrupt hiss cut the silence; Astrid smacked her heel against the edge of Hiccup's prosthetic, where his toes would have been, anatomically speaking.

"Sorry!" Hiccup grit his teeth in sympathy, sitting up and fumbling with the fake leg's rope securement, "I'll remove it."

"No, it's okay, you don't have-" Astrid began to stop him.

CLUNK!

"Too late," Hiccup chuckled, continuing to do so when she rolled her eyes at his stubbornness. The teenagers then laid down once more, resuming their cuddling position, Hiccup curling protectively around Astrid and covertly smelling her golden locks. Her hair exuded a notably spicy aroma, an intriguing combination of cinnamon and nutmeg which tickled his nose. Then, an unusually quiet voice arose and threatened him again, but without its stringent bite or malefic intent.

"If you tell about..._this_, to anyone-"

"I know," the boy interrupted and reassured her, content with keeping this moment a secret for just their knowledge, "This never happened."

High on his bravery, Hiccup then decided to rub and massage Astrid's skin, tracing the path of her clavicles by running his hands from the base of her sleek neck to her bony shoulders and back. Her skin rippled beneath his rough fingers, like Viking ships cutting through still waters and creating wave swells in their wake. His calluses, the dignified marks of a blacksmith, aided him in warming the girl.

"What are you doing?" Her question's tone denoted curiosity, but of the kind where she could already guess the answer and just wanted confirmation.

"Friction," murmured Hiccup bluntly, "Ever little bit of heat helps."

Astrid mulled on his words, cuddling her own hands against her sternum between her breasts. "I suppose so."

"Can't have your shoulders freezing off, you'd lose a couple of important appendages," Hiccup laughed quietly, and Astrid couldn't stop herself when her lips tugged upward.

With the chafe radiating from her shoulders, her brain finally noted how exceedingly tender the boy touched her. He didn't become lustful with his hands and take advantage of the scenario the gods thrust them into by taking advantage of _her_. Which would seem apparent, given that, at the end of the day, their friendship would persevere through thick and thin. But being alone, unclothed, and vulnerable shed some new light on her best friend's character.

He's noble, acceded Astrid, the word bouncing around within her head, until she connected why the descriptor fit so well on Hiccup - his

nobility stood out because he respected her and her body.

She didn't want to imagine what Snotlout would do if he found himself in Hiccup's position.

All of these acknowledgements flooded her brain with a buzzing light-headedness which conclusively showed the blonde maiden the stupidly obvious fact - which somehow still amazed her - that Hiccup did care.

He cared.

And for the past week she did nothing but ignore him because, what, he wanted to be more than friends? Oh, how awfully her heart crumpled when she reflected on how cold she acted towards Hiccup. Such inexcusable behavior could not be expunged by simply batting her eyelashes and saying an apology; she held fast to her conviction that actions spoke louder than words. Thus, maybe she could still salvage the remnants of their camaraderie with a gesture of gratitude - other than kissing him, she felt much too comfortable against his chest to turn over.

Wait, what?

Astrid blinked away the odd reasoning and nestled further into Hiccup's chest, the rhythm and coziness from his hands convincing her eyelids to droop slowly, concealing her aquamarine irises. Her eyes almost slipped completely closed to send her into a restful slumber, when an idea presented itself to the drowsy girl, eyes flying back open.

She knew what she could do to thank him.

Before she might pull back and second guess herself, Astrid stretched her lithe right leg out and slid it back, hooking it behind Hiccup's right leg. A surprised grunt bathed her neck in hot breath, but she pushed on as she dragged the stunned boy's leg up to settle in between her thighs. Once his leg became accessible, her rough, bare foot found its way to the lower extremity, chafing along the fibula between his shin and calf.

Hiccup lay dumbstruck while her petite foot, coarse with calluses from years of hard labor and athletic training, chased the cold away and spurred a glowing flame within his lone lower leg. His mind managed to quiet down enough from the exploding hormones for his tongue to unglue itself from the roof of his mouth and mumble, "What the...uh, what are you doing...?"

"Friction," repeated Astrid cheekily, twisting her head to glance at him from her peripheral, "Can't have your leg freezing off, can we?"

"But what if I wanted two peg-legs?" Hiccup joked in a histrionic whine.

"Oh, shut it, you."

Between the arousing scent of her hair and her foot's sensual caressing, a primitive desire overcame Hiccup without his volition, and he twitched. The odd sensation of blood rushing down in his body

caught his attention, until he twitched again. He froze, horror-struck.

It twitched yet again, engorging itself with blood.

No! No, no, no, no, no! This can't be happening, not here, not now! Hiccup frantically ransacked his thoughts for something off-putting and disgusting to imagine, something to stop it from hardening into a bone.

He pictured the afternoon when he couldn't escape the literal dragons' shitstorm, the droppings falling like bright green hail before it splattered onto him. He pictured when Ruffnut complained about needing his help with Barf's saddle, but instead tricked him into her dragon's stable and tried to seduce him. He pictured, peeking out from the top of his trousers when he bent over, Snotlout's ass-crack - ew, never mind! He shouldn't have envisioned that! _Please_, Thor, never again-

"Hiccup?!" Astrid's raised whisper echoed off the stone walls, jarring the flustered boy out of his revolting reverie.

"Y-Yeah? What's wrong?" stammered Hiccup, his flicking tongue accidentally stuttering while composing himself. At least his manhood avoided total embarrassment anyway, his metaphorical sword going as limp as a boned fish. He also didn't have to deal with the pain that accompanied him being in heat; gods, the life of an amputee truly sucked at times.

"I just...you stopped rubbing, and then you started squeezing me," she pointed out, hoping she didn't sound as if she wanted him to continue the comforting massage that she wanted him to continue. The frosty chill must be messing with her head, she justified dismissively.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, resuming his stroking with more vigor, "Sorry, I...I got lost in my thoughts."

"What were you thinking about?" Astrid muttered off-handedly, scrunching her brows together in consternation at the strangely inquisitive tug in her heart.

"Uh...how we're going to get back, you know, when the weather calms down..." Hiccup lied, biting his tongue in anxious anticipation. How come the hottest part of his tiny body felt like his thigh, the one pressed against Astrid's - on second thought, that makes complete sense. Hiccup forced himself to not dissolve into a giggling, immature teenage boy when his overloaded brain realized he touched her "forbidden area", it remaining covered notwithstanding.

"I see," hummed Astrid, her timbre collapsing into an almost inaudible whisper as the tugging of her heart feebly palpitated one last time, and then keeled over. It would've been kind of sweet if his thoughts strayed to her from time to time, because, truthfully, he-

Hold on, _sweet_? Astrid Hofferson, thinking _anything_ could be sweet? Since when did she have any desire for Hiccup to think about her? Where did this unattractively girlish fantasy come from?

"Hey, are you all right?" the boy inquired timidly, his worried inflection reviving her confused heart while she then proceeded to choke on it in her windpipe, "You sound as if someone died..."

She snorted at his obdurate pessimism, clearing her throat of the lump which lodged itself there and steeled her voice, "No, I'm okay, honestly. There is something I need to tell you though, so that we're clear on whatever...whatever _this_ is."

"Yes?" pressed Hiccup uncertainly, instinctively gripping the blonde tighter, not willing to release her yet. The absurd urge to snuggle closer into him distracted her; she centered herself with a shake of her head and a deep breath, and sighed an admission that, throughout her entire life, she only uttered once before - and incidentally to the same spontaneous, russet-haired boy.

"I'm sorry."

His hands stilled. Astrid paused and fiddled with the hem of her thin bindings, allowing Hiccup a chance to react to her monumental confession. Staring at the back wall, the girl frowned at the void of silence left behind by his speechlessness, the howling and moaning of the blizzard pounding her ear drums.

"Hiccup?" she queried, pressing her foot harder into his leg, seeking his attention, "Did you hear me?"

Stirring suddenly, he fondled the nape of her neck gently, answering, "I heard. But, Astrid, listen...I shouldn't...I felt..." He struggled to find the right words to convey how much he couldn't be angry with her, how much the fault fell on his shoulders, and how much he didn't _care_ about who should be blamed. He just wished for her to smile at him again. "You have nothing to be sorry for."

She sniffed, her nose and eyes itching, and gainsaid, "No, but I do!"

"I should never have asked you to marry me," Hiccup lamented, eyes squeezed shut as he rambled on, "That was insensitive of me, especially when I flouted that I could...could potentially _buy_ you. And calling you a coward? Oh, _Odin_..."

"Hey," breathed Astrid softly, feeling an unexplainable need to console her distraught friend, "Please, don't beat yourself up about it. We both said things we didn't mean." Hiccup's breathing became ragged and uneven from behind her, rustling loose strands of her flaxen hair. She pulled his broad hands away and held them tightly between her little ones, her lips brushing against his fingertips while she spoke, "How about we start over...wipe the slate clean? Would you be willing to do that?"

The boy nodded and murmured desperately, "Yes! Yes, yes, yes..."

"Good," she replied happily, her smiling assent getting lost in the deafening turmoil outside, "Me too..."

Hearing the uproar of the persistent frosty gales rather than her second confession, Hiccup leaned backwards to sneak a peek through the wide crevice marking the cave's entryway, and what he saw wrought

unrest in his mind. The pitch black of night seeped through the cragged gap like an unwanted house guest, encompassing the spooning Vikings in a stark darkness.

"The storm isn't letting up anytime soon. We'll have to wait until morning to return to the village," he informed his beautiful charge, rolling forwards to reclaim her bare back, the points of her shoulder blades digging into his breasts, "I'll take first watch, in case anything happens. You should get some rest, young lady."

Astrid snorted at the formal address, but made no comment on it before burrowing as close to Hiccup as their bodies would permit, usurping what body heat remained in his slim body.

"Good night, Hiccup," she bid tenderly.

"Good night, Astrid," Hiccup returned, his endearing tone not lost on the girl.

Exhaustion ensnared Astrid quite easily, her brain shutting down as sleep wrapped around her like a warm blanket, wishing her sweet dreams.

Or could that be Hiccup?

Hiccup couldn't keep his thoughts from straying to the blonde beauty tucked away in his arms, having fallen into a placid repose with a smile on her face. He grinned, not capable of focusing on preparing for tomorrow's escapade and possible interrogations. His eyes became heavy and they slid shut as he sighed contently, knowing that everything would be all right. His breaths became longer and drawn out, but nothing felt better than now, presently sleeping with the girl he longed for, who would hopefully make an appearance in his dreams tonight. His slothful mind checked out shortly after.

The two teenagers slept peacefully throughout the shrieking night, and didn't awake to greet the effervescent sunrise.

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The search parties tramped with haste, as fast as their short legs could carry them through the snow. One group followed the Night Fury through the trees of the forest, while the other group puffed behind the Deadly Nadder, who kept halting to sniff the air and snuffle the ground.

The azure dragon cocked her head, listening to the minute sounds of their prey, and darted westward on her light feet. Stormfly took pride in being reclassified as a tracker dragon, because she performed at her best when tracking - whether it be a rampaging Nightmare or a fuzzy baby bunny, she would find it.

And now, she needed to find her rider, her Astrid, and her friend, Toothless' rider, Toothless' Hiccup.

An opening in the mountainside caught her interest, where the faint smell of their scents and the sluggish beats of their hearts confirmed that she found them, both thankfully alive.

'Toothless!' Stormfly barked aloud, knowing he would hear her and

come, _ 'Over here! I found them! I found them! '_

The onyx dragon bounced in out of nowhere, and he almost strode right into the cave, but the party's leader withheld him with a single meaty hand on his snout. When the man looked in, he couldn't believe his eyes, taking a step back from the initial shock. The rest of the searchers flanked him on either side, wondering what he saw in the grotto's depths.

Inside the cave, curled up back-to-chest against the farthest wall, laid Hiccup and Astrid, both wearing naught but their skin and undergarments. His joy in discovering the two alive rapidly diminished when his suspicions arose; what they did became clear as day, with their clothes strewn about, cuddling against each other...

"HICCUP?! he bellowed, his booming bass viciously vibrating his vocal cords.

The boy sat bolt upright, twisting about with huge, fearful eyes to face the congregation of Vikings and dragons gathered a few feet away in response to the familiar growl that jostled him awake.

"Dad?"

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><p>AN: **Maybe Hiccup's dad will actually listen to him this time. Maybe? Why are you all looking at me as if I know what's going to happen next? Absurd. Nonetheless, I'm extremely delighted that this chapter has finally been written and uploaded.

Now for serious talk.

The next chapter may be delayed in being put up again (Again?!) and I really am sorry if it is. My iPad, the device on which I do all of my writing, has decided that it wants to be lazy; so, now half the screen doesn't respond to my touch anymore. That makes it a little difficult to write and edit efficiently, sadly.

Difficult, but not impossible.

Anyway, keep a weather eye out for another chapter, and hopefully this story will go more smoothly when I'm out of the hospital. Drop a review, whether you liked it or hated it, and I'll see you later. Diskonnekt out.

End
file.